REFLECTIONS

NARRATIVES of PROFESSIONAL HELPING

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NARRATIVE REVIEW BOARD

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Reflections from the Editorial Team: Honoring the Past, Embracing the Future

Darlyne Bailey, Monica Leisey, F. Ellen Netting, and Kelly McNally Koney

Abstract: *Reflections* Volume 24 number 4 serves as the introduction to the new Editorial Leadership Team and Editorial Board. This issue outlines their new structure and process. Most importantly are the articles herein that express the overriding themes of strength and resiliency as experienced in diverse contexts.

Keywords: migration, immigration, resiliency, disaster, self-awareness, editorial process

Since its founding by Sonia Leib Abels and Paul Abels, *Reflections* has been an oasis in a sea of journals, few of which are devoted to the beauty and insight of narrative. Over these past 24 years, thousands have enjoyed reading, publishing in, reviewing for, and even guest editing for *Reflections*!

As your new Editorial Leadership Team (ELT), we are fully committed to ensuring this journal's history of providing spaces for multiple voices through the power of narratives is honored and sustained. Narratives are valuable because they reflect the feelings, insights, and "aha" moments in which authors gained wisdom and self-awareness from their work with clients, colleagues, students, and others. Narratives contribute to empirical knowledge about the nature of practice in the helping professions. Finally, narratives often make important conceptual contributions that address unresolved theoretical problems.

Our New Structure and Process

This issue officially introduces your new ELT and our new structure and process that began last fall. As Editor-in-Chief of *Reflections*, Darlyne invited Monica and Ellen to serve as Associate Editors and Kelly to become the Assistant Editor. We were very excited when our Section Editors—Julie Cooper Altman, Jon Christopher Hall, Carol Langer, and Beth Lewis—agreed to remain with *Reflections*, each working most closely with one member of the ELT. The Section Editors and the ELT together became the Editorial Board. This Editorial Board has already met twice and moving forward will conference every quarter to ensure that the submission and review process is responsive to authors and respectful of the time and efforts of reviewers. In addition to our shared love of this very special journal, we are all committed to formative feedback, transparency, inclusion, and collaboration throughout our processes and relationships. We believe collectively these commitments will ensure the highest quality *Reflections* for you, our readers.

We remain indebted to Michael Dover (2012-2017 *Reflections* Editor and 2017-2018 *Reflections* Co-Editor and Publisher), who has answered more questions than we can count and who is now in the position of Publisher. Mike and his Publishing Team remain housed at Cleveland State University's School of Social Work, with Cathleen Lewandowski as Director of the school. In addition to Mike, the Publishing Team includes Tara Peters (Copyeditor) and Rebecca Krenz (2018-2019 Graduate Assistant). We are thankful that Robin Richesson continues to share her

talents as our Art Director. Our Publishing Partners—California State Long Beach, Howard University, Monmouth University, and the University of Georgia—serve as our oversight Executive Committee.

Open Journal Systems (OJS) is the software platform we use to publish the journal. This system was updated in 2018. Some features and functions have changed, resulting in a steep learning curve, and Kelly has become our guru in facilitating our rapid fire learning process. We know that these changes have impacted authors and reviewers who also interact with OJS, and we have appreciated their patience with us as we have engaged in this co-learning.

In speaking on behalf of <u>all</u> of us, as your Editorial Leadership Team, we remain committed to bring only the best to *Reflections.* As part of our *Reflections* community, we know this is what you truly deserve!

Calling for Narratives

Recently we revised guidelines for authors, based on the questions we are asking reviewers, so that everyone submitting a manuscript is fully aware of how their submission will be evaluated. These guidelines are on our website, but since this is our first opportunity to highlight them, we are listing them below.

- Convey interpersonal interactions, witnessed events, and felt experiences in a narrative format. Be clear about the author's role (e.g., practitioner, recipient of service, teacher, field instructor, student, researcher, other).
- Place your narrative within the context of a well-told story that helps readers discover new ways of thinking about the personal, the professional, and the political in our lives.
- Root your narrative in the rich and detailed portrayal of key moments, examples, and vignettes that fully portray the interaction taking place between and among the people involved.
- Place your narrative within a historical context, focus on the present, and consider the implications of this reflection for the future.
- Use references that might draw connections between the content and the published literature or that might assist the reader in understanding conceptual or theoretical conclusions about the nature of professional practice.
- Draw any conclusions about the need for qualitative or quantitative research related to the issues arising from your narrative.

Previously *Reflections* had a section dedicated to history. However, we all agree that history is so important that, as you can see from the guidelines above, we are asking authors to expand the core elements of their manuscripts to include past, present, and future dimensions. In essence, we are hoping to interweave history throughout published articles. Including a look at the "past" of the subject of a narrative would serve as a contextual grounding for how that narrative came to be (e.g., a bit about the author's past and/or about the history of the issue presented). Including the "present" would speak to the narrative itself as it presents today, while the "future" would hopefully include a vision of where this personal/interpersonal journey and/or phenomena

is anticipated to be going—questions, hopes, and even concerns and fears.

We welcome submissions to our four permanent sections: Practice, Field Education, Teaching & Learning, and Research. You will continue to see calls for special sections. The number of articles published will determine their size and whether they ultimately become special issues. We most recently saw this in *Reflections* V24(1). Regardless of whether they are published as a special section or a special issue, it is our intention that all *Reflections* articles are informative, evocative, and able to be used by our readers.

In addition to sharing the voices of those who largely live inside the world of academia, we want *Reflections* to be a space for our friends and colleagues who spend most of their time in the community, whether as social service providers or recipients. In so doing, we are purposefully reaching out to and soliciting narratives from clinical/micro-direct practitioners and clients of individual, family, and small group services, as well as those engaged with organizations, communities, and policies through macro-direct practice.

The Practice Section (Dr. Jon Christopher Hall, Editor) is based on the process of being a practitioner or a recipient of service. For example, these narratives give voice to practitioners who work and advocate with individuals, couples, families, groups, organizations, and communities; participate in social justice and civic engagement work; or become recipients of service in the very systems in which they have practiced.

The Field Education Section (Dr. Beth Lewis, Editor) focuses on the process of field advisement and field instruction, as well as the experience of being a student in a practicum. For example, authors should consider building narratives around insights gained from process recordings and verbatims, from supervisory relationships, or from other field experiences in which co-learning occurred.

The Teaching & Learning Section (Dr. Carol Langer, Editor) focuses on the process of teaching or being a student and continues the journal's practice of publishing narrative accounts about education and training. For example, classroom experiences, teaching innovations, university-community partnerships, continuing education, and other formal learning opportunities offer valuable insight.

The Research Section (Dr. Julie Cooper Altman, Editor) is focused on process. Although *Reflections* does not publish research results or literature reviews, the journal has a long history of publishing narratives of the interpersonal aspects of the research process. For example, authors are encouraged to explore the experience of collaboration in the design, development, implementation, and analysis of qualitative and quantitative studies or program evaluations.

We are thrilled to be publishing two special issues on cultural humility in the coming months to house the number of high quality manuscripts we received. These special issues of *Reflections* will include those who use the principles of cultural humility in their work, what it means to be a culturally humble practitioner, the challenges and triumphs of following this framework, training or mentorship in cultural humility, practice applications, and the fundamentals of cultural

humility. Our Guest Editors for these special issues are Beth Russell, PhD, LCSW, Pam Viggiani, PhD, LMSW, and Debra Fromm Faria, MSW, LCSW, from the College at Brockport's Department of Social Work.

On the horizon we are looking forward to publishing a special issue on continuing education—the many virtues and challenges inherent in that component of all professional disciplines. The Lead Guest Editor is Patricia Gray, EdD, LCSW, from Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College. The call for this special issue is posted on our website, and we encourage potential authors to read more about it!

We invite and receive submissions from a wide range of authors. While *Reflections* is only published in English to date, we continue to welcome manuscripts from those for whom English is not their first language; authors from around the world; those who have never been published before; and those who have little, if any, experience writing a narrative. Where possible, our practice is to work with these authors so they can develop their stories in a way that fits the journal. This may mean providing feedback and recommendations to authors before their manuscripts are sent out for review.

One of the best ways to get reliable, high quality reviewers is to recruit people our readers know. We hope you will join with us in asking your networks for potential reviewers. Potential reviewers first need to register for the journal. Once they are registered, they can email us at reflectionseditorialteam@gmail.com and Kelly can assist them in doing so.

We are particularly indebted to the hard work of the journal's 42 Narrative Review Board (NRB) members who are seasoned reviewers selected for their thorough and timely comments to be shared with submitting authors. NRB members agree to do multiple reviews each year and to participate in surveys and conference calls that solicit feedback on the quality of the review process.

Reviewers are the foundation of any successful journal, for without them manuscripts cannot move forward and authors cannot benefit from their valuable feedback. Please know how much we appreciate the volunteer time that reviewers contribute to *Reflections.* We could not do this without you.

Highlights of This Issue

We have organized the nine articles within this issue around themes that emerged within and across narratives, and we are excited to have contributions that transcend geographical and cultural borders. Overriding themes in all these reflections are the virtues of strength and resiliency, whether the reflection is about facing crises and disasters, embracing growth and continual learning as a helping professional, or overcoming barriers to pursuing one's dreams.

The cover art by Jose M. Loza (http://www.jmloza.com) wonderfully conveys these virtues. In the artist's words:

> ...this work is a response to the seldom discussed migration stories missing from childhood. The painting references retablos, small votive paintings offered by Mexican migrants to commemorate the dangers of crossing the border…The landscape composition is made up of elements referencing the flora, fauna, and topography of the Americas. (J. M. Loza, personal communication, April 8, 2019)

For us, the jaguar portrays courage and strength. In this work, the jaguar serves as a bridge, carrying migrants forward, while the brilliance of the flower is in direct contrast to the complexities of the societal challenges confronting the human spirit.

Through the lens of social justice, the importance of human relationships and the strength of the human spirit in the midst of large scale crises and disasters, both human-made and natural, are beautifully articulated by the authors of the first three articles in this issue. All three call for advocacy at the broadest level, while simultaneously calling for recognizing the potential resiliency of individual human beings.

Across these three articles are themes that reveal the interconnectedness of practice and policy. Given the current contentious debate over immigration, Lusk and Chaparro lift up the voice of humanity amid the clamor of political discourse. De Jesús and his colleagues recognize the need for increased activism by helping professionals who focus on policies that impede aid to Puerto Rico, all the while metaphorically framing their narrative in the lyrics of Puerto Rican playwright, Lin-Manuel Miranda. Loudd, Willis, and Boutté-Queen reveal the intricacies of responding at the individual, organizational, and community levels as well as the contributions of multiple disciplines in recognizing that trauma affects everyone differently.

The next three articles in this issue are about deepened self-awareness and practice wisdom that comes from continual introspection. Corcoran's narrative reveals a seasoned practitioner who has extensive experience in working with sexually abused clients. Despite all the evidence-based research on trauma, Corcoran demonstrates how one's practice experience, judgment, and discretion are critical practice components. Ruiz offers us a compelling narrative about the power of transformation when faced with a physical disability. Applying transformative learning theory to her experience, Ruiz provides insights into teaching practice approaches with "disabled" persons. Reminding us that disabilities are diverse, Talen relates an early life experience in which she was labeled as having a learning disability and told that "life is unfair." Reacting to being labeled, the author demands to know how to "make it fair." In so doing, Talen also addresses why she has entered a profession that espouses social justice as an overriding principle. These articles acknowledge the continual learning process and blossoming of layer upon layer of self-awareness that unfolds throughout one's life as a helping professional.

The final three narratives focus on the passions of highly motivated women who aspired to pursue teaching as a calling. Grounded in relevant literature and coming from diverse backgrounds and unique experiences, each narrative tells a story of how early impressions contributed to the authors' desires to make a difference in the lives of students. All three of these articles reveal the early experiences that influenced these now-adult women to teach. While coming from different cultures and unique pathways, these narratives offer readers a common

window through which to learn the many ways women can create powerful journeys of dedication and commitment to inspire future generations of students. Wilson, Darrell, and Rhodes overcame obstacles related to race, gender, and age. Alharbi speaks to a culture that encouraged women to teach, but within restrictive boundaries for female roles. Russell transcends early experiences, opening doorways to pursue a career in sexual health. All of these authors offer nuggets of wisdom for others who want to overcome institutional barriers by pursuing their dreams.

We trust that you will find this issue as you find all of Reflections—full of compelling narratives that offer insights that will be useful to educators, practitioners, students, and others alike. We look forward to hearing from you!

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- $250 or more - FRIEND FOR LIFE
- $1000 or more - A THOUSAND THANKS

Please consider contributing to *Reflections* now:
https://www.csuohio.edu/class/reflections/friends-reflections.

Thank you!

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Accompanying the Migrant and Refugee: Reflections on Resilience

Mark Lusk and Perla Chaparro

Abstract: Traditional helping models have concerned themselves with assisting, fixing, and, at best, serving the client. While this may suffice for conventional circumstances, accompanying those whom we serve informs us more deeply of their lived experiences. This opens new perspectives in working with those who experience great adversity. The authors learned this strategy over a decade of work serving migrants and refugees from Mexico and Central America. It can be a useful strategy with a wide variety of client partners.

Keywords: migration, refugees, trauma, resilience

Hundreds of thousands of forced migrants have made the journey from Mexico and Latin America to the U.S.-Mexico border to escape severe hardship, adversity, trauma, and risk to life and limb. To the extent to which this heretofore largely invisible group of people was noticed at all, it has been to highlight their suffering, losses, and trauma. Yet, in a decade of working with this population, we have documented an enormous resiliency as exemplified by hope, faith, deep connections to culture, and social networks that sustained them through hardship. By *accompanying* them rather than "studying" them in a traditional sense, we have come to understand how to transcend models that seek to *fix* rather than *serve* this resilient population. Through the process of accompanying them, we have been able to share their narratives with scholars and the general public, work alongside them to advance their individual and collective causes, and educate the next generation of students about the risks and resiliencies of migrants here and worldwide.

Background

Circumstances during the last decade in Mexico and the Northern Triangle Central American countries of Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador have become so severe that a significant portion of the population of each country has internally migrated to another region or emigrated abroad, usually to the United States or Mexico, in search of safety, freedom from persecution, and the hope of an opportunity to raise a family in economic security. These individuals and families are *forced migrants*—they do not have a choice except to leave. To stay is to risk their lives. Moreover, if they are returned or deported to their country of origin, they believe that they will be killed or gravely harmed (Lusk & Galindo, 2017; Phillips, 2018).

Central America is a firestorm from which residents are fleeing. An international medical association has documented "unprecedented levels of violence outside a war zone" and states that: "Citizens are murdered with impunity, [and] kidnappings and extortion are daily occurrences. Non-state actors perpetuate insecurity and forcibly recruit individuals into their ranks, and use sexual violence as a tool of intimidation and control" (Medecins Sans Frontieres, 2017, p. 8).

Unlike economic migrants, who travel in search of work, usually with the intent of returning to

their country of origin, the forced migrants from Central America report that they have left to escape threats to themselves or their families or have been victimized by severe crime, including abduction, homicide, forced conscription of family members into organized crime, human trafficking, rape, sexual violence, arson, or other grave threats. (Bermeo, 2018; Lusk & Chavez, 2016; Lusk & Galindo, 2017). These circumstances have led thousands of Mexicans and Central Americans to migrate northward in hopes of accessing entry into the United States. The United Nations reports significant increases in individuals who have fled Central America as refugees; there were 294,000 asylum-seekers and refugees during 2017, up from 18,000 in 2011 (Phillips, 2018). The number of migrants from the Central American triangle increased by 46% from 2007 to 2015 (Cohn, Passel, & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2017). As the levels of violence have reached record proportions, so have the total number of migrants apprehended by authorities at the U.S.-Mexico border (Meyer & Pachico, 2018). In addition, the number of asylum requests by individuals fleeing Mesoamerica has grown considerably. Yet, asylum is granted rarely because asylum law is narrowly interpreted to protect only individuals with a well-founded fear of persecution on the basis of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular group, but not individuals who are fleeing criminal organizations or extreme violence (Meyer & Pachico, 2018).

In the Central American triangle countries of Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, there has been a growing number of people who have been displaced by the consequences of widespread organized crime, public unrest, and civic insecurity. Part of the problem is that tens of thousands of Central Americans who had been convicted of serious crimes in the United States were deported to their home countries, where they then became part of widespread organized crime, including gangs such as the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-19), which had originally been founded in Los Angeles, CA. There are currently 65,000 active gang members in El Salvador (Martinez, 2018). In addition, decades of civil war have destroyed much of the economic infrastructure, leaving thousands of people without any form of support and minimal access to schooling for boys and girls with the result that thousands of children are forced into gangs or are trafficked (Martinez, 2018). In many cases, there is no viable option for residents of the region to relocate within their own country, as the networks of organized crime are able to track them down and internal relocations can be dangerous (Knox, 2017). With the backdrop of crime and the absence of public safety, the threats to personal integrity are such that when combined with economic austerity, individuals feel compelled or forced to emigrate.

Honduras, one of the poorest countries in the Latin American region, has one of the highest homicide rates in the world. Within the country, there are 190,000 internally displaced persons and refugees as a result of violence, extortion, threats, and forced recruitment by urban gangs (Central Intelligence Agency [CIA], 2018). Guatemala, a similarly poor country, has a very high rate of outward emigration due to political instability, civil unrest, and violence. There are 242,000 internally displaced persons as a result of internal conflict in that country (CIA, 2018). El Salvador, a major transshipment country for illegal narcotics, has been troubled by the widespread effects of organized crime. According to the CIA (2018), 71,500 individuals are internally displaced or are domestic refugees. These factors stimulate forced migration abroad to the United States, and failing that, to Mexico as a country of destination rather than solely of transit (Phillips, 2018). Faced with predatory gangs, and in the absence of state protection in

their own country by the local or federal police authorities, migrants seek shelter and sanctuary in the exterior (Knox, 2017).

Even as immigration policy has hardened under the current administration's zero-tolerance policy, the flow of migrants continues unabated. Knowing that they are likely to be turned back at the border, rejected for asylum, and detained and deported, they keep coming because they see no viable alternative. Most asylum cases will be turned down; on average, around 80% of asylum applications from Central America and Mexico are denied, and those who seek asylum are usually imprisoned in immigration detention facilities (Grillo, 2018). Beginning in 2018, many of those who were seeking asylum have been forcibly separated from their children. The current administration has issued a number of executive orders in support of more aggressive immigration enforcement. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), which has been authorized to hire 10,000 new officers, is fast-tracking anyone in violation of immigration laws and proceeding to their expedited removal (deportation). The agency is also disregarding any mitigating factors, such as lack of a criminal background, old age, or criminal victimization in deportation proceedings. In addition, state legislatures have enacted bills that empower local law enforcement to cooperate with federal authorities in pursuing unauthorized immigrants. In Texas, Senate Bill 4 authorizes local law enforcement to inquire about immigration status and to detain individuals and release them to federal immigration authorities (Hing, 2017). The purpose of these aggressive enforcement policies is to interdict and to deter immigration from Mexico and Central America. Nonetheless, because of the situation in the region, and despite knowing that children have been separated from their parents, unauthorized immigration from the region has not declined.

Encountering the Forced Migrant

Over the past eight years, a small team of researchers and students have interviewed and assisted forced migrants and refugees. In three waves of research, we have spoken and worked with over a hundred migrants as research participants. In concert with local agencies that serve migrants, we have also responded by volunteering as social workers and students to provide assistance to several hundred migrants from El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico, and other origin countries for forced migrants. El Paso, TX is a transit point for both authorized and unauthorized migration into the United States. During the summer of 2016, for example, several hundred migrants and refugees were released into the community by ICE to a local shelter (Annunciation House) for migrants. These were individuals who had been processed by the border patrol after presenting themselves at the bridge between El Paso and Ciudad Juárez requesting asylum or who had been apprehended in an unauthorized crossing and also requested sanctuary. Under the previous administration, thousands of such migrants were released to reunite with family members and relatives in the United States while being required to report to an immigration hearing at their destination city. Over a period of months, hundreds of individuals were released into the local community. Members of the team and dozens of social work students volunteered to encounter the migrant, provide immediate social assistance by connecting them to their family members in the interior, helping to organize their onward travel plans, and sheltering them temporarily in a variety of churches and shelters around the city. Throughout 2017, as economic migration declined and forced migration increased, the region experienced continuing flows of

forced migrants and refugee applicants. Subsequent surges of migrants continue to be served by students and a host of volunteers from nongovernmental organizations, churches, and advocacy groups. In 2018, as families who had been separated from their children were reunited, El Paso became a focal point for these reunifications, and hundreds more were served by volunteers. The migration continues and there is no reason to expect that it will stop.

Apart from working alongside migrants as volunteers, we also encountered them in shelters and migration service agencies, where we had Institutional Review Board approval to conduct research on: their well-being; reasons for leaving; conditions and experiences encountered on their journeys; and their adaptation and challenges while in the border region, in detention, and during deportation. These encounters provided the basis for research publications and scholarly presentations, but our intent was always broader (Chavez, Lusk, & Sanchez, 2015; Craft & Lusk, 2017; Lusk, 2014; Lusk & Chavez, 2016; Lusk & Galindo, 2017; Lusk & Rivas, 2018; Lusk & Villalobos, 2012; Torres & Lusk, 2018). In addition to publishing articles in scholarly venues, we reached out to present at professional forums, at civic groups, to church groups, and to the media, including print, public radio, and television (in both Spanish and English). It has been our strong opinion that, given the lesser impact and comparatively low readership of articles published in academic journals, it was imperative that we reach a wider audience to inform them about the migration, the people who were making the move, the reasons for their travels, the adversities and difficulties that they encountered while on the journey, and the hostile treatment that they experienced at the border, coupled with an explication of how strong, tenacious, and resilient they were throughout the process. The general public and practicing professionals need to be exposed to the reality of forced migration. Given the adverse and negative narrative that prevails around migrants, particularly those from Mexico, Central America, and Latin America, our intent was to provide a fact-based counterpoint to what is essentially a racist national narrative by describing the true nature of their journeys and why they left their country and took such great risks and suffered such great losses to get to a border knowing that they might not be able to cross or to gain sanctuary. We also explicitly spoke to their strengths and resiliency, something that other investigators and volunteers had not been communicating widely.

Witnessing Their Testimonies

Conversations with forced migrants revealed common themes and salient topics that were recurrent in many dozens of encounters.

Travelers uniformly said that they had *no choice but to leave*. They often said that financial security also factored into the decision, but it was not the dominant concern. Indeed, they cited the loss of their home, job, close friends, and relatives, all of which were left behind. Many stated that they were nostalgic for their home country and hoped that someday they might return. A young Guatemalan man recounted the moment when he left his Mayan village in the highlands: "When I looked back, I saw my mother standing in the door waving goodbye. I knew then that I would probably never see her again."

Migrants repeatedly recounted tales of seemingly *unending suffering*. It was as if they went through a series of traumatic events. First were the ordeals at home—the factors that made them

leave. It could have been escalating extortion, gang rape and sexual assault, abduction and torture of journalists for ransom, human trafficking, forced conscription of a son to join a gang, the murder of a partner or spouse, arson of one's business, the massacre of one's employees at a car repair shop, illegal arrest and battery by the police, or the forced disappearance of a daughter.

These are among the stories of why people left. Yet, these hardships continued along the journey, during which time they could have been assaulted, kidnapped, abused by migration authorities, gone hungry, gotten sick, spent time outside without shelter, fallen from the train, or abused by a *pollero* (human smuggler) they had hired to help them on their way. And, finally, there's the hardship that they confront when they present at the border with a high likelihood of being arrested, detained, and deported by federal officers. There is a helplessness in constant victimization in each of these stories, yet at each stage, they coped.

These hardships were surprisingly balanced by the *kindness of strangers* and *informal networks* of fellow travelers who helped along the way. For example, migrants from Central America and southern Mexico often find respite and sanctuary in a network of *Casas del Migrante*—church-affiliated shelters along the route from San Luis Potosí to Ciudad Juárez and El Paso. There they find generous volunteers who provide temporary shelter, food, and supplies. Along the way, some travelers stay in homes of strangers where they might work on a temporary basis. Along the route of the big cargo train, *La Bestia* (the Beast), travelers who have hopped a ride on the train cars headed north find groups of women who have gathered at spots where the train slows to turn a corner and hand them fresh food items and bottled water.

In addition, migrants draw on *deep reservoirs of resiliency*, not only from their own personal and psychological resources of hope, perseverance, forbearance, patience, and fortitude but also drawing on the reservoir of shared values and culture of those with whom they travel. These social supports consist of the collective strength of companion travelers who look out for each other—their countrymen, fellow villagers, and new-found friends—to help them bear the load of risk and to nurture hope along the way.

Consistently, migrants told us of the deep *faith* they had and that they were protected and watched over in their perilous journey. It provided them with *hope*, whether it was framed through a traditional Catholic perspective, another faith tradition, or through a sense of a guiding higher power. Sometimes they stopped along the way to visit a church, or they prayed with other travelers. Time and again migrants said that while they might have been believers at home, they became truly faithful and had religious experiences in the face of enormous and multiple hardships. Prayer was solace and respite. Although they drew on enormous internal resources, they also felt that they were being watched over.

Similarly, their hope and resilience derived from their *children*. When asked what kept them going in the face of adversity, a question we asked everyone we spoke with, the most consistent answer was: "Faith, my children, and hope. I am doing this for my children so that they will have the opportunity for a better life than me, where they can live in safety. It is for them that I take this risk and make this great sacrifice."

Leaving Home

Leaving home is the last resort. It is through these individual narratives and perspectives that we can truly reflect on the root causes of forced migration and sources of resilience in migrants. What circumstances motivate a person to leave their home and "willingly" start a journey frequently faced with adversity and uncertainty? In many conversations with migrants, we identified motivating factors based on a sense of survival, family, hope, and faith. For example, 18-year-old Mariel from Honduras held her one-year-old son as she stood on the shelter's patio talking to her husband, 19-year-old Diego. The couple fled Honduras after she and her son were threatened. "I left because of my child; he is so little. I want to see him grow up, so I came here because they threatened me," she said. "They were offering ten thousand pesos for my child's head and mine." The reason is that her husband was blamed for the death of his traveling companion, who fell and was killed by *La Bestia* (The Beast). Diego explained, "The first journey was because there were no jobs, she was pregnant, and we did not have anything to eat. That is when I started thinking, 'I have to find a solution.' So I left, and things happened . . . and everything became more complicated." However, the couple highlighted their strength to leave to secure a better future for their son. Now they hope to find a job and a way to cross to the US.

We also encountered 40-year-old Martin, who had just been deported from El Paso a few hours earlier. During the interview, he reminisced about his past life, living in the same house for over 20 years. "I never wanted to leave because I had a steady job," he said. But he saw no other choice. His wife's brothers and sister had been kidnapped. One body had been found and the rest were still missing, prompting the family to seek asylum in a U.S.-Mexico port of entry after receiving multiple threats. "My family was scared. My wife was nervous, restless. She was not eating, not sleeping. I saw how desperate she was that day, and that was when I said, 'Let's go, we'll figure it out.'" His responses also reflected disappointment toward his government and justice system, which were incapable or unwilling to protect them. "Who can help? I'll be honest with you; we know that justice here can ignore you sometimes," he stated. Now he remains separated from his wife and three children, who will continue their asylum petition process in the US.

Similarly, there are other testimonies of people who left their homes after being threatened and forced to work for criminal organizations. One of these testimonies is Jose, a 45-year-old man from Mexico, who says the level of corruption within his government is one of the factors pushing him to leave. "How do you know which authority you can trust? I know there is no protection for people like me," he said. Beyond the physical threats and family separation, the man relied on faith to begin his journey. He explained, "I believe that faith ends when life ends. Even though it is difficult, one always has to fight and to have hope. I think it is the last thing that one can lose, no matter how dark it is."

Peregrinations

After saying farewell, a challenging journey remains ahead for many. In their narratives, interviewees recounted circumstances of extreme hardship, yet they also described their faith as a resource that contributes to their resilience. When we met Elena, she and her 7-year-old

daughter were recovering from multiple injuries suffered in a car accident. She was part of a group from Honduras that hired a *coyote* to drive them the last length of their journey to the U.S.-Mexico border. She would remain in a *casa del migrante* (migrant shelter) for almost three months while waiting for her daughter to recover from her broken legs. "I have faith—although one can lose it sometimes—still. God knows why he does things, and everything he does is right," she said. She told us that during her journey, a female companion carried a Bible with her. She added, "We would read it, and I would walk and pray." She shared with us her regrets for not being able to protect her daughter in the accident. According to the reports, the coyote was driving under the influence and had escaped the scene. This particular shelter in Ciudad Juárez, Casa del Migrante, has a long partnership with a doctor who volunteers her time every week checking migrants' health. Still, more resources were needed with this case. It took two weeks for the shelter staff to find a medical specialist and donations to cover other costs. After recovery, the family will head to the port of entry and request asylum.

Following similar narrative patterns, 28-year-old Jareth described that his hope relied on a supreme being, who accompanied and protected him throughout the journey. "I believe in God and I leave everything in his hands. He is the one who gives me the faith to continue and be able to carry this burden," he stated. Jareth from Honduras fled north after gang members had threatened to kill him if he did not join their organization. In Mexico, he was kidnapped by people who had offered him a place to stay for a few days. At first, he thought he had found a shelter, but things changed quickly. "They did not let me go. Those people were armed and everything. There were beatings, abuses, and I was drugged," he said. Jareth was able to escape but said he was afraid to press charges. "The American dream is a dream that motivates you to keep going, but it is a dream that is also very sad," he added.

In a different way, many responses also described the generosity of strangers along their journey as a protective factor in their path. "When we were walking, we would always meet people in the streets and they would give us some water, a ride, and some change to buy food—they were good to us," said Mariel from Honduras. Another example is 28-year-old Luis from Honduras, who received twenty dollars from a stranger to buy food and clothes. "I keep [people who help me] in my mind, and I will never forget them, wherever they are. That's my Mexico, doing good and loving good people from Central America," he shared. In his journey from Honduras, he had been kidnapped on his way to the border and was released when his sister in the US paid for his ransom.

A Hard Landing

For better or worse, "landing" is part of a migrant's journey. There were testimonies of those who had reached the southern side of the U.S.-Mexico border and who were now deciding how to continue northward on the next part of the journey. In contrast, there were those who had just been deported to Mexico from the United States and were now contemplating where to go next. Either way, both groups confront doubt and uncertainty in their plans. "I am fortunate to be alive—lots of things happened on the way. Emigrating is not easy," said 28-year-old Josue.

For many, the "landing" in the United States consisted of arrest, interrogation, detention, family

separation, and deportation. Most Central Americans and Mexicans who present for asylum are denied and are charged with illegal entry, a criminal offense, even though they have a well-founded fear of victimization if they return to their country (Meyer & Pachico, 2018). The hardships they endured in their country of origin are compounded by adversity and trauma during their journeys, and upon arrival, they face a continuation of misfortune and suffering. For example, Josue had already been deported back to his native Honduras once, yet he decided to try one more time. He told us he was tired but still hopes the situation will work out for him, either in Mexico or in the United States. He said:

> If things changed and this bad man, Trump . . . I have nothing against him, but he has a black heart. He does not know what hunger looks like in our country. He does not know the needs that make us leave our country. He does not know if there are children dying of hunger in our country. He knows nothing. He just knows how to deport you. He does not know what we suffer here to arrive: assaults, . . . discrimination because we are from Central America, being robbed, and being kidnapped.

For now, having been deported from the US and unwilling to face possible death in Honduras, he is looking for a job in Mexico, his only option.

In the case of Eddie, it was a story of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. While attending a party, he got into an altercation. He was threatened and shot days later but survived. According to his testimony, the man who tried to kill him works as a hitman in Honduras. For him, returning was an unsettling idea, but he also shared his determination and hope: "I am going to fight for my [asylum] case; I know I can do it and I know I can win it."

Back at the shelter in Ciudad Juárez, deportation and family separation were frequent themes of discussion and reflection. As he contemplated the idea of not knowing whether he would see his wife and children again, Martin spoke about his strength to face adversity after his deportation. "It is hard to be separated," he said. As he detailed his story, he recalled how his daughter would hold on to him every time he got home from work. "My wife says that she cried a lot the first few days, and now she wants to see me and asks where I am," he said. Now, he told us, his wife just tells the daughter that her father will be there later. His grief was palpable as he spoke about his concerns for his family.

Accompanying the Migrant

There is a living tradition within Latin American cultures of passing on stories or *cuentos* through the *testimonio* (testimony). Oral histories are the means by which the disempowered have been able to record their discourse as an authentic narrative told from the perspective of the participants and witnesses (Lusk & Galindo, 2017). Absent the ability to shape the narrative about migration from the perspective of the power elites who typically frame migration as a threat, the migrants themselves do not frame their experience as part of an international crisis, but as an individual journey of hope, faith, and perseverance. Therefore, the first step of accompanying the migrant is to contest the dominant narrative of migrants as hazards to the status quo by recognizing that this narrative serves only to stoke fears, distract, and redirect

animosity by scapegoating innocent travelers and refugees. Instead, this false narrative is replaced by the true testimonials of the emigrants themselves. Their narratives recount the reality and living history of a decades-long march northward of people seeking sanctuary, opportunity, and justice. Accompanying the migrant provides us with a witness to the times, which leads to a testimonial of consciousness-raising (*concientización*) in the tradition of Brazilian sociologist Paulo Freire (Yúdice, 1992; Freire, 1968).

What does it mean to witness with the migrant? Dylan Corbett, a human rights advocate and leader of the Hope Border Institute, articulates its meaning:

> Our humanity is never realized except in the risk of communion with others, in the reality of their everyday, concrete existence. The vulnerable person challenges us to recast the center of our lives in terms of encounter, accompaniment, and bearing witness to the truth of the human condition. (D. Corbett, personal communication, August 2, 2018)

To accompany the migrant, or for that matter, anyone whom one is encountering as an ally, is to get beyond the transactional and functional aspects of professional relationships and into a partnership of mutual critical engagement. As a volunteer, social worker, student, healthcare provider, or paraprofessional, the immediate and sometimes overwhelming needs of migrants for shelter and food can force the relationship into one of crisis management. Amelia Furrow, a social worker and immigration paralegal who works with migrants notes:

> There is very little space to pay attention to people's lived experiences or to be fully present with people when you're dealing with their immediate and pressing needs in a crisis situation, but in time I purposely go into depth about their lives, their worldview, and the uniqueness of their lived experiences, recognizing their resiliency, their capacities and abilities. And I have learned much from them, and have been impressed always by their forbearance, perseverance, and ability to just be able to figure things out. It is always moving for me what my clients will do for their children—their deep love for their families and parents for whom they sacrifice continuously. (A. Furrow, personal communication, July 24, 2018)

Being present with and recognizing the lived experiences of migrants inverts the dominant racialized narrative about international migration and refugees. Engaging them with authenticity and cultural humility empowers them to narrate the authoritative and legitimate story of their experience.

Praxis is the process of turning knowledge and consciousness into action. It is not enough to have one's own awareness raised without acting upon it. Witnesses to the hardships that migrants have experienced in their countries of origin, along the way, and at the border are compelled to serve as messengers, to inform others, to push back against the pernicious narrative and engage in the public arena. As Dylan Corbett has observed:

> We can approach public policy one of two ways. Through ideology, good or bad, born of the head, of rhetoric, of disconnected reflection, prejudices, the lens of partisan politics,

primal instincts, and a desire to preserve what one has. Or we can take the risk of encountering the other in their real needs, which opens up a whole new vista of knowledge, a totalizing perspective that challenges and changes one's life, and offers us the possibility of living from the heart. (D. Corbett, personal communication, August 2, 2018)

To have an impact on policy, the public needs to comprehend the lived experiences of migrants. Putting this into praxis, we have gone beyond publication in academic journals and presentations at symposia to reach wider audiences in multiple settings. While it's helpful to publish in the social science journals and to present to academics and professionals, a significant impact can be found in the public arena by conveying the message to the media—television, public radio, print, and online in both Spanish and English. The research team, faculty, and students have engaged multiple audiences regionally, nationally, and abroad. These efforts have included trainings for volunteers, community teach-ins at the local public library, workshops with youth leadership groups, seminars with young professionals, discussions at faith groups, and, even though the reception might not always be a warm one, presentations at local civic organizations and clubs.

Praxis also may include efforts to engage the political arena through direct action such as rallies, marches, and demonstrations in support of the rights of immigrants, especially when they themselves take the podium. It may involve the publication of professional position statements on immigration reform, the separation of migrant children from their parents, and the prolonged detention of migrants, such as those published by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and other professional groups (AAP, 2018; NASW, 2018). It's important to ask the obvious and troubling questions such as, why are we putting people in cages for trying to save their lives? And, why are we imprisoning migrant children as pawns in the immigration debate?

Traditional helping models have concerned themselves with assisting, fixing, and, at best, serving the client. While this may suffice for conventional circumstances, accompanying those whom we serve informs us more deeply of their lived experiences. This opens new perspectives in working with those who experience great adversity. We learned this strategy over a decade of work serving migrants and refugees from Central America and Mexico. It can be a useful strategy with a wide variety of client partners.

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Back to College during Hurricane Recovery:
Faculty and Students Navigating the New Semester Together

Grace Loudd, Nicole Willis, and Needha Boutté-Queen

Abstract: The arrival of Hurricane Harvey brought a city to a stand-still, leaving unforeseen destruction in its wake. As based on the perspective of three social work educators, this narrative recalls the process of not only experiencing the storm but also a need for creatively finding ways to transform despair into opportunities for growth. Significant and specialized organizational resources are often necessary for post-disaster recovery; however, everyone, including faculty, can play equally important roles in helping one another and students transition back to campus after the disaster. The authors conclude with six key recommendations faculty members from all disciplines can utilize and integrate into post-disaster recovery efforts.

Keywords: disaster recovery, higher education, student transition

It was the start of a new university fall semester, and social work faculty were feeling the usual excitement and anxiety that comes with preparing for the first week of class. The final touches were being put on syllabi, and between committee meetings, we found short moments of time to catch up with one another to share the highlights of our summer travels. Returning students excitedly spent a few minutes walking the hallways to check in with their favorite professors; we always enjoyed preparing them for yet another successful semester. We left committee meetings on August 24, 2017, with no expectation of our city not seeing the sun for the next five days. Similarly, we left campus that night curious about what new issues would be discussed in the following day's opening faculty meeting, although not realizing our expectations would never come. Then, on August 25th the first of 50 inches of rain began to fall. Over the next several days, fear gripped us as Hurricane Harvey kept us hostage in our homes and shelters, resulting in an estimated $70-$108 billion in damages (Quealy, 2017). As water continued to rise, it drowned our belongings, memories, daily routines, and any hope of a normal semester.

The sun shone on our faces for the first time late afternoon on August 29th, and it felt like warm beams of hope. As flood waters slowly receded in various places, we started the journey from crisis to recovery. Amid the rescues, mud-outs, volunteering, completing FEMA and insurance paperwork, and frantically trying to find open and stocked grocery stores, the reality of returning to campus post-hurricane began to surface. Frantic student emails started rolling in: "I lost my textbook in the flood. What do I do?"; "I see the online quiz just closed for the first week. Can you re-open it?" A department faculty composed of seven individuals anxiously sent one another check-in texts and emails, only to discover that many within our small team also experienced tremendous loss in the flood. We learned that both students and faculty had flooded homes, apartments, and cars, and they had lost textbooks and, even, electronics. Some of the public K-12 schools, which our kids attended, were flooded so badly that they either weren't going to open or anticipated opening several weeks late. Then the email arrived that made us really panic, which informed us that classes were scheduled to resume September 5th. How would we return to campus if our children's schools were closed? How would we get to campus if we didn't have working cars? How could students do well in courses if textbooks had been washed away? And, the most anxiety-provoking question that many faculty members worried about was what they

would need when classes began.

Hurricane-Related Losses and Impact

Tangible Losses

There were many needs that had to be met in order to successfully begin the fall semester. The first was a need for a cohesive, well-structured department. This required ensuring someone was always available to answer questions and tend to last-minute administrative requests, and that everyone collectively acclimated students to college and classroom environments. Post-hurricane recovery planning efforts that were normally taken for granted were suddenly in total disarray. In between needing to sort through damaged items, finding suitable housing and childcare, spontaneously meeting with disaster inspectors, caring for distraught relatives and friends in surrounding disaster areas, and tending to our own mental and physical health, the thought of faculty having to put all of that on hold to focus on a semester seemed almost inconceivable. Those losses not only affected our personal lives but also our professional roles as faculty members.

Within the confines of a well-organized department, a second need pertained to students since they almost always required assistance with academic advising and registration, both of which were necessary for securing financial aid and scholarship money. All of these last-minute functions were delayed due to the disaster-related system and personnel disruptions. Approximately 84% of our total student body required financial aid (Texas Southern University, 2016) to even remain in school, and those types of delays added another unaccounted-for layer of stress in light of students having faced many of the same disaster-related crises faculty were struggling with. For many students, the prolonged lack of accessible funds almost certainly meant needed supplies, such as textbooks and computers, fell further down the list of priorities. For others, it also meant an inability to pay rent, an inability to secure reliable transportation, and the requirement to choose between essential needs.

Upon our return to campus, we found that many more than previously anticipated had either lost their books in the flood, couldn't purchase textbooks because financial aid was delayed, or were not in a position to replace previously-purchased textbooks, supplies, and electronics. The delayed opening meant students who had not yet registered for classes or been advised by a faculty member were in a more precarious situation due to the extra stretch in time. Many faculty members found classrooms half full or online classes with almost no activity during the first several weeks of the semester. We learned that students were spending a considerable amount of time trying to find temporary affordable housing and standing in emergency food assistance lines for up to eight hours. Trying to balance the reality of securing resources to assure basic needs with coursework demands was a real challenge, and it was one we anticipated would last not just for the first few weeks but throughout the academic year.

Intangible Losses

Hurricane Harvey not only swept away basic and tangible needs, but it also damaged things that

were abstract and intangible. Spending days or weeks in crisis while simultaneously being forced to respond to the same took a toll on our physical and mental well-being. In the days following the storm, many of us lost our sense of time. According to Rosalie Hyde, a trauma-based social worker, a lack of time orientation is one way the brain tries to manage stress (as cited in Kolker, 2017). We started most days not knowing what day of the week it was, and during the day we frequently lost track of time. Many had trouble falling asleep or staying asleep. Those in our homes anxiously went to bed at night wondering if we'd feel cold water when we stood up in the middle of the night. Those in shelters could hardly sleep at all. The constant noise and lights in addition to worrying about children, getting to work, and accessing resources all haunted our sleep.

The hurricane also took our sense of predictability and control. As human beings, we look forward to some sense of predictability. We depend on this because it reduces the level of anxiety in our daily lives. Both during and after the hurricane, small things and events we usually predicted would happen were replaced with uncertainty. And, with both predictability and control as cornerstones of effective classroom management, these uncertainties were most pronounced in the academic environment. It was at this juncture when we dug deep to find predictability and control reserves we may not have even known existed within us. At every opportunity, we shared bits of our strength with one another to simply help our colleagues get through the day. As a department, we recognized that no matter the uncertainties, our reality was that we had to return and begin classes in the midst of recovery while we were going through recovery ourselves. As faculty members listened attentively to students describe their particular circumstances, we grappled with not minimizing their situations because we knew others, including ourselves, were dealing with what we perceived as worse. As we gently encouraged them to create small task assignments so as to not fall too far behind, we wondered if they realized we were sacrificing for our families to be there with them. With both faculty and students meeting at the four-way intersection of life—natural disaster, individual coping, professional obligations, and required deliverables—navigating the new semester became akin to a very delicate dance.

Hurricane-Related Recovery Response and Facilitation

Similar to Hurricane Ike in 2008, Hurricane Harvey was traumatic, leaving us feeling powerless during the crisis. In contrast to Hurricane Ike, Hurricane Harvey hit our city and university at a point when fall student enrollment exceeded 10,000 students for the first time in over a decade, and many of them were first-time freshman and transfer students (Austin A. Lane, personal communication, September 28, 2017). We were very excited because quite a few of these freshman and transfer students identified social work as their academic major. Yet, we were also worried because oftentimes these are the new students who sometimes need extra guidance to start strong and remain on track. During the crisis, the most accessible form of communication with students was posting messages through the department's information portal. For those with access to electricity and the internet, this kept them abreast of the information we had to share. For those without access, messages remained on the board with contact information in the event of intermittent connections. Fortunately, we weren't the only ones thinking this way, as we were pleased to observe efforts our university made in striving to assist both students and faculty

during and after the crisis. Under new administrative leadership, the university implemented a series of steps demonstrating what our department recognized as concern for the whole person or intentional efforts to address needs beyond the classroom. Organizational responses such as these reinforced and bolstered our ability as a department to better support ourselves so that we could better identify ways to support our students.

Organizational-Level Responses

The university played a large role at the organizational level toward helping alleviate crisis-related stress during the transition back to campus. What an organization chooses to do or not do sets the tone for other entities, such as faculty and staff. University administrators engaged in several tasks meant to address the most urgent needs and tangible losses experienced by both students and faculty members. The first task was ensuring student safety for those already on campus for the fall semester. During the crisis, campus police and food service staff ensured those students were taken care of with food and basic needs while the campus was closed. The campus police also posted pictures of students in their dorms eating and talking with officers so that the out-of-state parents were reassured of their safety and care.

Next, the university prioritized financial needs by focusing on payroll and student financial aid as early as possible. Although the institution wasn't officially open, to ensure faculty and staff experienced minimal disruption in receiving their monthly pay, direct deposits were made on time, and those receiving paper checks were directed to a designated place to retrieve their checks the same day. Students were provided with specific dates for the following week that they could expect their refunds to be available. On August 30th, the university announced that its disaster relief program, University Cares: A Pathway to Healing from Harvey, was scheduled to start accepting applications on September 5th, the same day the university was due to re-open. The relief fund was immediately established for simultaneously accepting donations; providing financial relief for all faculty, staff, and students who were severely impacted by Hurricane Harvey; and maintaining active, available community-based resources (Austin A. Lane, personal communication, August 30, 2017).

To further minimize the likelihood of Hurricane Harvey becoming a long-term barrier to student success, additional organizational-level steps were taken to establish stabilization and assist in creating a new normal. For example, class registration deadlines were extended by two weeks to accommodate students who were displaced. Additional Hurricane Harvey-related scholarships were made available to students reporting a severe need. And, midterms were delayed by one week, giving students more opportunity to prepare for scheduled exams.

As social work faculty, we recognized that the offering of organizational resources and accommodations was one thing, but the ability to take advantage of those was entirely another because trauma affects everyone differently. Mental health services are often needed by natural disaster survivors because it is a type of exposure to actual or threatened serious injury or death (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Kolker, 2017), and this is no exception when considering the academic environment. However, another reason this service is paramount is because of the cumulative effects of negative life stressors that we encounter in absence of

natural disasters. For many, these stressors may not necessarily meet the DSM-5 trauma criteria; however, evidence suggests these particular stressors are more closely related to college students' overall physical and mental health functioning (Anders, Frazier, & Shallcross, 2012). The variability of individual life events compounded by natural disaster-related exposure is what creates unique experiences for all. It is at this point when social workers, counselors, and psychologists are frequently called upon to deliver post-crisis mental health interventions in educational settings. In fact, our university, like most campuses, has a counseling center, and during the crisis, their trained counselors, in partnership with a local disaster relief organization, conducted outreach in person, by phone, and via text message. Similarly, the university routinely promoted its counseling services for everyone in addition to its Employee Assistance Program for faculty, staff, and their qualified family members to discuss ongoing hurricane-related and other stressors. All of those relief services were made available in multiple languages and for the hearing impaired.

The university's efforts during and after Hurricane Harvey set the tone for approaching disaster recovery as a continual restorative process. Within this context, faculty members from all disciplines were in a unique position because while they were restoring their lives they were also the ones coming into daily contact with students restoring their lives and needing guidance too. The overall sheer scope of the university's post-disaster response might have left faculty wondering: What part can I play in helping students' post-disaster transition if my role is that of a teacher instead of a mental health provider? The role of mental health providers was usually acknowledged and well-defined. The role faculty could play in contributing to students' post-disaster transition back to campus as non-mental health providers was not defined. When this is not clearly defined, it can contribute to faculty members feeling powerless and being less likely to acknowledge students' needs as related to a crisis.

Faculty-Level Responses

It was important that the university address difficulties that arose during recovery, ensuring hurricane-related delays and losses had minimal effects on the transition back to college for everyone. It was just as important that the faculty did its part in the recovery process by helping students stay on track throughout the transition. Social work is a strengths-based discipline within the helping profession, and its faculty members typically originate from a variety of settings focused on different aspects of mental and physical functioning. As based on our professional and post-disaster related experiences, we offer six recommendations for all faculty—those in and out of the helping professions—to enhance student transition back to the classroom during recovery.

Recommendation 1: Post Community Resources on Blackboard

Faculty can utilize Blackboard (or similar electronic platforms) to post campus, city, county, state, and federal resources to assist students with recovery. These can include links to the campus counseling center, contact information for FEMA, local financial resources, shelters, scholarships, and so forth. These should be announced in class, online, and whenever a new resource is added to the list.

Recommendation 2: Secure Free Textbook Copies

Faculty can take creative steps to increase student access to textbooks until they are able to purchase a book or replace the book that was destroyed. For example, the university library has an eBook database from which many books and textbooks can be downloaded or accessed for free. We were able to find some of our textbooks in the eBook database and send that link to our students. Faculty should consult with librarians on their campuses to find out if they have a similar online resource. Faculty can also contact textbook publishers to inquire about one or more free copies that can be put on library reserve. Publishers may be willing to send a hard copy as a result of a natural disaster or provide students who are in need with a temporary link to an online copy for the first few weeks of the semester. We also offered students opportunities during the first few weeks of the semester to schedule appointments during office hours to sit and read our desktop copy.

Recommendation 3: Add Flexibility to Due Dates

In our social work department, syllabi are detailed and thorough—lecture topics, specific readings, and due dates are all detailed in a daily course calendar. It is difficult, even in a typical semester, to keep on schedule. After factoring in great class discussion, any missed days of teaching due to emergencies, conference presentations, or school closures due to inclement weather makes it easy to get behind in the lecture schedule. The impact of Hurricane Harvey compounded this challenge even further by resuming operations a week late. We decided to add flexibility to quiz and assignment deadlines to ease stress and increase the probability of success on these assessments. Instead of closing our weekly quizzes on each assigned date, we either extended deadlines or opened weekly quizzes for the entire semester, which meant that students who started behind were not at a disadvantage for not completing those assessments.

Recommendation 4: Increase Reminders about Assignment Due Dates

Many of our students had to balance—and remember—appointments with social service agencies, insurance adjusters, FEMA representatives, and so forth. In a typical semester, we encourage student accountability by making it their responsibility to stay on track with syllabus deadlines. In light of Hurricane Harvey, the social work faculty decided to significantly increase reminders about assignment due dates. We sent weekly reminders via Blackboard announcements and email, as well as announced upcoming due dates several times a week in class and online. These extra reminders helped students remain aware of what deadlines were coming up, thus encouraging and increasing the likelihood of completing assessments on time.

Recommendation 5: Re-Orient Students to Time and Date

Faculty can implement a few simple yet key changes in classes to re-orient students to a sense of time. For example, in face-to-face classes we can begin each day by referring to the time: "It is now 9:30 a.m., and we'll begin class." It is also recommended to re-orient students to time near the end of class. For example, "It is now 10:30 a.m., and we now have 15 minutes left of class." Bringing a small wall or desk clock can help with this in that students can visually see the time

while in the classroom. For online classes, similar changes can be made by frequently highlighting and referencing different points in the semester. For example, announcements, notifications, and online class lectures can start and end with references to calendar weeks or commonly known periods of activity: "We are now in our second week of the semester."; "In the next two weeks, we will be taking our midterm exams."

Recommendation 6: Increase Predictability during Class

As faculty, we can help our students regain a sense of predictability through simple additions to our teaching styles. For example, in a face-to-face class, faculty can write a few things on the board: announcements, what the lecture will cover for the day, and any in-class activities that will be accomplished. Faculty can review that at the beginning of each class. At the end of each class, faculty can briefly describe the objective for the next class meeting. The same can be replicated for online classes through the use of weekly modules placed in the same learning system location or as a regular feature of your online lecture. This all takes just a few minutes and is a simple technique to reduce anxiety by effectively adding predictability within the classroom environment.

Conclusion

When we wrote this reflection—while still in the thick of recovery—we not only remembered the warmth on our hands as we reached up to touch the sun rays for the first time after the hurricane, but we also remembered the warmth in our hearts after seeing community members helping neighbors in need. They used boats to rescue neighbors, turned their homes and businesses into shelters, volunteered to serve the displaced, and helped mud-out the homes of strangers. The beauty in this was that it was not just the first responders who helped through the crisis and recovery but also everyday people working within their competencies to help others meet their basic needs.

During the transition back to campus work after any natural disaster, everyone is working to establish a sense of normalcy in their own lives. However, the academic environment is by design about nurturing our future leaders, and this is where college administrators, mental health counselors, and faculty can do their part by playing different yet equally key roles in facilitating that transition. The organization as a whole might set the tone for recovery, but faculty can make small meaningful adjustments to the class structure and process to support students. Student support has been found to be a protective factor following traumatic events (Norris, Baker, Murphy, & Kaniasty, 2005; Phillips & Herlihy, 2009). Faculty who provide supportive resources to students can have a positive impact on their mental health, increasing the likelihood that students will complete that semester successfully. For us, Hurricane Harvey contributed to post-traumatic stress. However, stress can become growth when students actively engage in effective response coping (Cook, Aten, Moore, Hook, & Davis, 2013). During recovery, we hope that as faculty members address and overcome their own post-disaster losses, they can also contribute to students' post-traumatic growth by engaging in and adapting these recommendations as based on our experience with Hurricane Harvey. We encourage social work faculty members to share these approaches with faculty in other departments, during meetings,

and during trainings, and include them as part of the campus disaster plan.

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"In the Eye of a Hurricane": A Narrative Account of the Efforts and Emotions of University Stakeholders Responding to Hurricane Maria

"In the Eye of a Hurricane" is a lyric from the song, "Hurricane" (Miranda, 2015b, track 13).

Anthony De Jesús, Madeline Pérez De Jesús, Mary Schone, Carolina Acosta, Lynnette Colón, and Michele Maccarone Brophy

Abstract: Despite the physical distance between Puerto Rico and Connecticut, this narrative describes how a multi-stakeholder group supporting Latinx university student initiatives experienced Hurricane Maria and its aftermath from a distance, on their campus at the University of Saint Joseph in Connecticut. Lyrics written by Puerto Rican playwright Lin-Manuel Miranda provide a compelling metaphorical framework for understanding these experiences and coming to terms with the loss facilitated by both natural and man-made disasters. The authors share their experiences of confronting feelings of fear, loss, guilt, and anger even as they focused on mobilizing a campus response to Hurricane Maria, which included relief, activist, and healing work. They share lessons learned about multi-stakeholder collaboration, and they highlight how they responded to the lack of infrastructure at multiple levels.

Keywords: community disaster, Hurricane Maria, multi-stakeholder collaboration, narratives, trauma

Introduction

Beginning on September 16, 2017, each of us at our small New England university were deeply impacted as we witnessed from afar Hurricane Maria's sweeping devastation of Puerto Rico. People walked in chest-deep waters, houses were left without roofs, and other homes collapsed entirely. The young and the old cried and looked in bewilderment as the community disintegrated. Television images sparked in each of us both a sense of helplessness and an impulse to mobilize our school community.

In this account, we reflect on our individual and collective responses to Hurricane Maria and the relief work we initiated on our campus. As faculty, staff, and student affiliates of the Institute for Latino Community Practice,[1] we partner on campus-wide programs to support Latinx students and related research initiatives. As members of the institute's internal advisory group (nicknamed the "LOOP"), we meet monthly and have a ritual of starting each gathering with a dedication, which serves as a way to focus our time and to connect our projects to the larger

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[1] The mission of the Institute for Latino Community Practice (n.d.) is to "create a community of learners dedicated to the advancement of knowledge and best practices to serve the Latino population." This is achieved by supporting students, advocating for systemic change, and encouraging research on these topics. The internal advisory group, nicknamed the "LOOP," is comprised primarily of social workers, but it also includes counselors, nurses, administrators, and student support faculty.

vision for equity, justice, and access to education as a means of power. We share our experiences of confronting feelings of fear, loss, guilt, and anger even as we focused on mobilizing a campus response to Hurricane Maria, which included relief, activist, and healing work.

Lyrics written by Puerto Rican playwright Lin-Manuel Miranda provide a compelling metaphorical framework for understanding these experiences and coming to terms with the loss facilitated by both natural and man-made disasters. Best known for creating two Tony Award-winning musicals—*In the Heights* (Miranda, 2005) and *Hamilton* (Miranda, 2015a)—Miranda has long been vocal about the socio-political conditions which affect Puerto Rico, such as the debt crisis, via newspaper opinion pieces and performing raps written to increase awareness (Miranda, 2016). The incorporation of rap and hip-hop themes into his play further validates the cultural contributions and artistry of Miranda as a Nuyorican/Puerto Rican living in the US (Herrera, 2016). Moreover, his artistic work specifically names and tackles issues affecting Puerto Ricans and other marginalized groups in the US, such as themes of displacement, gentrification, and acculturation. Miranda's (2015b, track 13) lyric, "I wrote my way out," from his song, "Hurricane," which is from the musical *Hamilton* (Miranda, 2015a), underscores that, for us, writing this reflection was a strategy for coping with the tragic loss due to a natural disaster as a means to incite change.[2] We are writing our way out by sharing this narrative with the expectation that it will educate, affirm, and inspire our colleagues in social work, all helping professionals, and those professionals committed to collaborative healing work.

In the weeks after the hurricane, Miranda emerged as a national advocate for rebuilding the island in the best interests of its residents. Further, his work is infused with a critical optimism that illuminates the contributions of immigrants and people of color to the US.[3] Miranda's artistry serves as a thematic amplifier for our narrative.

Maria, Man-Made Disasters, and Migration

Miranda used his renown to shed light on the tragedy in Puerto Rico in a newspaper opinion piece that he wrote as a call to action (Miranda, 2017b). He talked about Uncle Elvin, who was without electricity for 84 days (Miranda, 2017b). This meant no refrigeration, no lights, and no hot water. Thousands of homes were destroyed, rural residents were isolated, businesses were

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[2] Miranda's song, "Hurricane" (Miranda, 2015b, track 13), describes how Alexander Hamilton's home island was destroyed by the hurricane. After writing down his description of the hurricane and its effects, his writing inspired others to fund his emigration to New York (Miranda, 2015b, track 13). Like the 160,000 migrants from this modern economic and natural disaster (Center for Puerto Rican Studies [Centro], 2018), Hamilton's migration was inextricably linked to the hurricane. Migration related to the natural disaster is a central theme of the musical (Miranda, 2015a), and it parallels the experience of many in Puerto Rico and other under-resourced and marginalized countries and communities.

[3] This can be seen in Miranda's choice to focus on the life of Alexander Hamilton, an immigrant born in Nevis who became a founding father and the nation's first Secretary for the Treasury (Murray, 2007). In the wake of Hurricane Maria, Miranda helped organize major relief efforts and used Twitter to denounce the inactions of the Trump administration to offer aid, and he then wrote a song specifically to raise funds for survivors of the natural disaster (Coscarelli, 2017).

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closed, and migration to the mainland increased.

Unfortunately, his Uncle Elvin's reality is still the truth for so many Puerto Ricans. The impact of Hurricane Maria was felt worldwide and still is.

Hurricane-related deaths within a year of Hurricane Maria totaled more than 4,000 (Kishore et al., 2018).[4] Furthermore, reports from the Center for Puerto Rican Studies (Centro, 2018) detailed that 160,000 people have migrated to the US during and since Hurricane Maria—some to our state of Connecticut. The effects of the hurricane extend across time and place. Despite the physical distance between Puerto Rico and Connecticut, this narrative describes how we experienced Hurricane Maria and its aftermath on our campus at the University of Saint Joseph. The lyrics and storyline from Hamilton (Miranda, 2015a) and In the Heights (Miranda, 2005) frame our reflective narrative, starting with the story of Alexander Hamilton.

Alexander Hamilton's story is now prototypical due to the combination of man-made and natural disasters that have destroyed less developed areas of our world. Gill (2007) discusses the difference between a natural disaster and a technological/human-related disaster. In the case of Puerto Rico, both types of disasters are present and evident in our reflections. On the one hand, hurricanes are a part of life on the island,[5] which explains why many families felt prepared for Hurricane Maria, as they had experienced natural disasters in the past. However, the deteriorating infrastructure, the lack of attention to larger planning for electricity and water over decades, and the poor governmental responses contributed to an exacerbation of the consequences of this disaster (similar to Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans). The effects of the hurricane were not only felt in Puerto Rico but also reached our classrooms and living rooms in Connecticut. In 2016, we were the sixth state with the most Puerto Ricans (301,182) in the US (Centro, 2016), and we were to then receive 1,449 Hurricane Maria evacuees (Centro, 2018).

We enact and advance a model for multi-stakeholder collaboration in our work supporting the educational attainment of Puerto Ricans and other Latinos, and we turned to that model in our support of hurricane survivors and their families. Here we highlight how we responded to a lack of infrastructure at multiple levels. Finally, we reflect on the need for increased activism within social work and other helping professions around U.S. policies that impede aid to Puerto Rico.

"There Is Quiet for Just a Moment" (Miranda, 2015b, track 13)

The song, "Hurricane" (Miranda, 2015b, track 13), from Miranda's musical, *Hamilton* (Miranda,

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[4] Although other estimates may be lower, this is due to the oftentimes arduous and bureaucratic process of bringing a deceased's body to Puerto Rico's capital for an autopsy to confirm the cause of death (Kishore et al., 2018). Additionally, causes of death that are related indirectly to the hurricane, such as difficulty traveling to the doctor or hastened death due to a lack of healthy food and water, do not have a place on the autopsy form and, thus, are harder to quantify (Kishore et al., 2018).

[5] Almost 120 years ago, Puerto Rico experienced another disastrous hurricane, Hurricane San Ciriaco. There were approximately 3,000 deaths and loss of livelihood as farms were destroyed (Library of Congress, Hispanic Division, 2011).

2015a), speaks to the temporary silence experienced by so many during the most intense part of the storm, the eye. Here, too, we confronted deafening silence as communication was lost with the island; a sense of shock and powerlessness settled upon us. Because we live in an age of immediate access to information via social media, it was terrifying that we had not heard about Puerto Rico. Our fears and worries intensified as we communicated with each other. Each phone call began with, "Have you heard from folks in PR?"

This silence allowed for the expression of emotions in classrooms and public spaces on our campus. For example, when Madeline Perez De Jesus—one of our faculty members of Puerto Rican descent—arrived in her classroom on the first day after the storm, she immediately acknowledged the devastating impact. A student walked in late and immediately apologized for being tardy, and she announced, "I just got the phone call! The call from the shared phone on a mountaintop where there is the only weak cell signal that is usable sometimes during the day. And it was from my aunt . . . My family is struggling but okay." Students cheered as their peer cried tears of joy and pain. Other students left the room crying.

Michele Maccarone Brophy, one of our academic advisors with a social work background, encountered one of her student advisees shortly after news of the hurricane spread. The advisee came to disclose that she had missed two weeks of classes due to anxiety and worry about her family in Puerto Rico. She lived here with her grandmother, but her parents and siblings were in Puerto Rico. The student shared that she could not think about anything else. She eventually dropped out of college for the semester.

Unlike Madeline's students who were troubled while in class, Michele's student was so impacted that she could not even bring herself to school. This had greater implications as the academic trajectory of numerous students with ties to Puerto Rico was forever altered as course withdrawals resulted in the loss of a semester. The feelings of devastation, loss, and anxiety were only some of the emotions surfaced. Our LOOP meeting was dedicated to those impacted by Hurricane Maria, but despite normally being a productive and attentive group, we had trouble staying focused on the agenda. We shared and attempted to process our reactions to the impact of the hurricane. Anthony De Jesus, a faculty member of Puerto Rican descent, felt "survivor's guilt." One challenge was in negotiating his own sense of guilt (from being spared through no fault of his own from the devastation), which was soon eclipsed by a sense of helplessness in confronting the lack of information and ability to respond immediately to those in most need.

These feelings resonated with those of us with relatives on the island. The term "survivor guilt" was coined by Lifton (1967), who named the phenomenon as a reference to the relatives of Holocaust survivors who wrestled with the feelings of guilt for outliving loved ones and to those victims themselves who felt guilty because they survived. Our experience of survivor's guilt extends beyond being present at a traumatic event and surviving it; it also applies to Anthony's notion of "being spared through no fault of [our] own from the devastation." We were spared because our families migrated to allow us to live outside of Puerto Rico and have increased access to opportunity. Our reactions manifested in a number of ways. Some of us felt numb. Some of us had difficulty taking showers as we knew that there were loved ones who were not afforded access to water. Madeline realized that she modified a comment that she typically

would make to her toddler while teaching her how to wash her hands: "If my child left the water faucet running too long, I used to say, 'We need to save the water for the fishies.' Now we say, 'We need the water for Puerto Rico.'"

"We Are Powerless" (Miranda, 2008, track 12)

Balancing work/life activities with processing emotions related to the disaster was difficult for professors and students. With the level of emotional upheaval, classes with impacted students (and professors) shifted topics and managed emotions even as they engaged in the curriculum. For example, in one Spanish class, a third of the students had at least one immediate family member living in Puerto Rico. Michele describes how Hurricane Maria was their primary topic of conversation. It helped immensely that the professor opened up discussion about it. The most upsetting thing for the students was the inability to communicate with their family members—not knowing was nerve-wracking. Wanting to help but not knowing how was another frustration that left students feeling helpless and powerless.

As we struggled to process this perfect storm of forces, the compelling refrain, "We are powerless" (Miranda, 2008, track 12), from the song "Blackout" (Miranda, 2008, track 12) in Miranda's first musical, *In the Heights* (Miranda, 2005), proved prophetically affirming. Those of us who saw this musical recall one critical scene in which the neighborhood residents experience a blackout, which is also replicated for audience members in the performance when all the lights and sound are shut down; audience members wonder if a power outage really occurred. As the characters in the musical try to find each other and seek refuge, they sing about the precipitous blackout.

After multiple bars of song, which express the chaos that has ensued in the blackout, the characters sing that "we are powerless" (Miranda, 2008, track 12). The song—which plays upon the double meaning of people with low economic and political power struggling to survive after losing electricity—serves as a powerful metaphor for Puerto Rican hurricane victims as well as the LOOP. We felt increasingly powerless in our efforts to foster a more inclusive campus that responded to humanitarian needs during a national backdrop of scarce resources and racist anti-immigrant sentiment.

The impact of and response to Hurricane Maria did not only affect the residents of Puerto Rico, but they also generated strong emotion from people all over the world. Hurricane Maria's wrath came at a time when low-income communities of color in the US were feeling particularly vulnerable, exposed, and targeted as a result of the oppression of the Trump administration. Just a month earlier, we witnessed white supremacists marching with swastikas, Confederate battle flags, and anti-Semitic banners in Charlottesville, Virginia, while anti-racist protesters responded. We heard President Trump declare, "There were very fine people on both sides" (Haberman, 2017, para. 7). Moreover, we continued to feel the impact of immigration policies that separate families and threaten the college aspirations of "dreamers" (Penichet-Paul, 2017, para. 1). Black Lives Matter grew to become an international movement fighting against the systemic racism and violence toward Black people. And we saw a drastically different and proactive response to providing aid to residents impacted by Hurricane Harvey (Texas) and

Hurricane Irma (Florida). President Trump visited Puerto Rico a week after the storm hit, and the trip was memorialized with the surreal images of him throwing rolls of paper towels at the residents of the island. The official post-hurricane death count to this day minimizes the catastrophic nature of this natural and man-made disaster.

The events that occurred during the summer and early fall of 2017 created a daunting emotional and pedagogical burden on our campus and in our social work learning community. In addition, we (faculty) were aware that some on our campus were not outraged by the devastating incivility of the Trump administration which harbored nativist values that see immigrants and migrants as undeserving outsiders.

Efforts

"They Passed around a Plate" (Miranda, 2015b, track 13)

We turn again to the *Hamilton* (Miranda, 2015a) song, "Hurricane" (Miranda, 2015b, track 13), which references how individuals mobilized to assist those in need. As the song says, "they passed around a plate" (Miranda, 2015b, track 13). We did the same. Motivated to help in some way, several individuals and groups at our university began donation campaigns. Although benevolent, the uncoordinated efforts soon developed frustration in us. Departments, including Spanish languages, social work, and our arts center and individual campus leaders were collecting goods, but there was no plan to coordinate them and transition them off campus and into the hands of families. As a result, we organized ourselves to serve as the main point-people to collect and transport donations. For example, Madeline received many emails and calls for efforts to aid Puerto Rico on campus, but she soon realized that the various initiatives were not coordinated. As a social work educator, she tapped into her background as a community organizer and wrote up a master copy of all the efforts that were occurring and began delegating tasks to consolidate those efforts. She first separated the monetary donations from the donation of supplies. Money was collected as they literally "passed around a plate" (Miranda, 2015b, track 13). Steve Raider-Ginsburg, the director of our arts center, made the announcement and collected contributions at each show. Robert Madden, a social work faculty member, did something similar at a community meeting he attended. Together, the LOOP identified a reputable organization to which they could write out a check and send all the funds. This turned out to be the Hispanic Federation.

We established a donation drop spot for each of the departments involved along with a coordinator who would monitor the items. Once those were identified, we wrote a statement for our university communications page, which advertised this effort. In less than a month, the donations were abundant. Then it was time to focus on the more complicated task of working with non-profits and Puerto Rican organizations to which donations would be distributed. Carolina Acosta, the undergraduate student representative on the LOOP, remembers that after two weeks of collection, the donations piled higher and higher. The lobby of the humanities building on campus housed over 50 cases of bottled water and tens of hundreds of canned goods and hygienic items. The mountain of these donations towered above the table they were gathered next to, which was a visible symbol of the support being offered.

There was a sea of organizations that promoted their help toward Hurricane Maria relief efforts, but deciding on one was overwhelming. The search began with the criterion of an organization that would cover the shipping cost of the donation items, and few seemed to do so. Carolina spent hours on the phone, sent over 30 emails, and scoured the internet to find a human to contact about the goods, but this proved to be nearly impossible.

Carolina's frustrations mirrored those of many of us trying to help. We continuously asked: What can we do? Where can we send what we have gathered without an exorbitant shipping cost? How sure can we be that these donations will get to those in most need? Our university, like many organizations, was unable to cover the cost of shipping. And even if they could contribute, there were the logistical issues with items being shipped to Puerto Rico but being left in the port of San Juan. News stories featured tons of packages arriving to Puerto Rico and being left to rot because there was no plan in place to transport the items from the dock into the hands of the people in the towns. The towns with functional post offices were the towns with less immediate need. Therefore, an informal system developed, which identified trusted people in towns with working post offices who would drive to people who needed the items. In some cases, strangers helped strangers. Further complicating matters was the 100-year-old policy called the Jones Act.[6] President Trump granted a 10-day waiver of the policy, but the delay in aid had already occurred. We knew that in order to get the items into the hands of people on the island, we needed to identify a community partner who was already planning a chartered flight to Puerto Rico. This information emerged because of Carolina's attempts to create a distribution plan.

Madeline describes how a grassroots community effort was imperative at this point since we were located in Hartford, Connecticut, where there is an active Puerto Rican community. She called a dozen former students, all Latinas, who obtained their BSW degrees from the University of Saint Joseph as adult learners and asked them specifically who was organizing a chartered flight of goods to send to Puerto Rico. One of the alumni, Paula Ferreira, directed her to the Puerto Rican Society in New Britain, Connecticut. Paula took it a step further by serving as a direct link between Madeline and the president of the organization, and she provided her number for this purpose. Sanctioned by Paula, Madeline called Maggie De Jesus (the president) and told her about our efforts on a Thursday night. She happily agreed to have members of her

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[6] The Jones Act increases shipping costs by requiring that all goods that move between U.S. states and territories do so on ships that are owned and operated by the United States. This puts the burden on Puerto Rico to pay to receive aid while in crisis and is costly even when not in crisis (Isidore & Park, 2017).

organization take the items with them to Puerto Rico. The only challenge was that she was unable to take the bottled water as the weight was more than they could handle. Madeline then organized the LOOP members to meet and load three cars full of supplies to meet Maggie. Within a one-hour lunch break during a marathon session of Saturday classes, the University of Saint Joseph community mobilized to transport the items and load the cars.

Mary Schone, the graduate assistant supporting the LOOP was in charge of the caravan. Mary called the director of the Puerto Rican Society of New Britain to make final arrangements. Once again, the collection campaign met a hurdle. This organization was no longer accepting donations that would be sent to Puerto Rico due to shipping timing and cost but instead would use all remaining donations for families displaced to the US by the natural disaster. We knew that hundreds, possibly thousands, of Puerto Ricans would be arriving in our city due to the displacement of the hurricane, and we realized they needed assistance as well. Therefore, we made peace with the fact that our donations would not make it to Puerto Rico but to recently-arrived Puerto Rican families in our city. We then had to turn our attention to figure out how to transport the donations of bottled water.

Michele read about a car dealership that was arranging for a chaperoned transport of goods to Puerto Rico. She had her car serviced at a sister dealership and communicated with the manager to secure shipment of our water bottles. The water was desperately needed to ensure clean drinking water, but the bottles were so heavy to ship that many organizations were unwilling to do so. Once again, students and professors of the Institute for Latino Community Practice, the Spanish department member, social work colleagues, and Latino students and faculty worked together to get the heavy water bottle packages into our personal vehicles.

The challenge and transportation of donations was juxtaposed with the resolve to get it done. After collecting these donations to meet the immediate needs of survivors in Puerto Rico, time could be focused on the emotional needs of survivors here.

Writing Our Way Out

We also sought to raise awareness about this issue by documenting our story. In Miranda's (2015a) musical, *Hamilton*, he chronicles the trajectory of Alexander Hamilton from destitute youth, victimized by familial and natural factors, to acclaimed founding father. According to Miranda's lyrics, Alexander survived his own devastating hurricane, and he "wr[o]te his way out… wr[o]te everything down far as [he] could see" after his own town was ravished by a hurricane (Miranda, 2015b, track 13). In the spirit of *Hamilton* (Miranda, 2015a), we were attempting to process and survive post-disaster by writing

our way out. It was important for us to document our story and to show the unity among the multiple stakeholders in this effort. Furthermore, as an academic institution, the power of writing is taught and practiced as a way to liberate and raise awareness. We hoped to raise awareness about structural problems in Puerto Rico and elsewhere.

The other reason it was important to write our way out was because it created the conditions for us to be authors in our story. In times of disaster and crisis, the human condition is tested, and individuals who are focused on survival may act in ways other than what is typically socially acceptable. Developing a critical social justice lens allows us to extend compassion for all people pushed up against dire situations. Blodorn and O'Brien's (2011) analysis of the media coverage of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans reminds us of the racist ways that the press told different stories about survivorship and trauma. They described two photos. One was of an adult white couple (a man and a woman) who were in chest-deep water with a bag of items—they were labeled as "victims." The other photo featured an African American male, also with a bag of items immersed in floodwaters—he was described as a "looter." It is not hard to see how white supremacy shaped the narrative of people, even when they were in the same traumatic situation. White people become "victims." Black and brown people are "criminals." In the case of Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria, the death count for black and brown people was downplayed and inhumane conditions prevailed and remain.

We began to see this same double standard of media coverage take place with Hurricane Maria. Accounts of theft and dishonesty were shared without the context that the island lacked important frameworks to receive aid. In fact, we view the abusers as the capitalist nation in which we live, which thrives on a supply-and-demand economy even in the face of human tragedy.[7] We witnessed Federal Express prices quadruple if one was attempting to ship items to Puerto Rico. Airline flights also went sky-high. Even the Sony transistor radio, which was $20 on Amazon this summer, became a $50 item post-hurricane. We noticed it, and we are using our voices to call out this injustice and rewrite the story with our own narrative.

"Almost Like Praying" (Miranda, 2017a)

Miranda's (2017a) song, "Almost like Praying," was recorded by him and various Latino artists to support relief efforts for Hurricane Maria. The song is special for a number of reasons. One, its lyrics feature the names of every town in Puerto Rico, a small but significant gesture to commemorate residents throughout the island and let them know they are not forgotten. Second, the song features a sample from the show tune "Maria" (Bernstein et al., 1957/2004, track 6) from the musical, *West Side Story* (Bernstein, 1957), which is about star-crossed lovers who are from rival communities—a white community and a Puerto Rican community. Again, "Maria" served a double meaning as it is a popular name in Puerto Rico, a reference to the first musical (Bernstein, 1957) with a featured focus on Puerto Ricans, and it is now the name of the most

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[7] "Disaster capitalism" was a phrase termed by Klein (2007) in her book, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism.* The term fits aptly in this case because disaster capitalism describes "orchestrated raids on the public sphere in the wake of catastrophic events, combined with the treatment of disasters as excited market opportunities" (Klein, 2007, p. 6).

devastating natural disaster to hit the island in its history. The song "Maria" (Bernstein et al., 2004, track 6) is thus a bittersweet anthem to the fraught relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States and an indication of the second-class citizenship of Puerto Rico.

After getting a handle on the initial grief and devastation of the hurricane, mobilizing to secure both financial aid and personal goods, and reflecting and writing about our experiences, our community still needed healing. We, too, needed a space for emotional release. We also needed to be "almost like praying" (Miranda, 2017a). As part of our commitment to support Latino college completion, the LOOP provides support to a student mutual-aid support group that was created and led by Latina adult learners called the Adelante Circle of Support.[8] As the holidays approached, Latina students openly expressed their guilt and grief. They wondered aloud how they might focus on enjoying the winter holidays when their loved ones were lacking basic needs. They expressed feeling selfish if they attempted to focus on their studies. In response to student needs, LOOP member Lynnette Colón, also our university campus minister, volunteered to start off the next meeting of the Adelante Circle of Support with a special focus on "hurricanes and holidays." We created a sacred space and healing community. In describing her preparation and facilitation of the session, it became obvious that some of our students were struggling with keeping balance within the realm of having peace in reality. How does one have peace when their hands are tied from a distance? How does one continue to live their daily routine when their loved ones in Puerto Rico have either lost their lives or their lives have changed forever? This resonated with Lynnette as well. When she arrived at her mother's home, she saw her hold her face in horror as she watched news reports about the hurricane and cried, "Ay, Mi Isla!" ("Oh! My island!").

The meditation was an invitation to look within and to know what one has done is enough. It was also an opportunity to see our actions here (i.e., achieving higher education, careers, caring for our families, defending social justice, providing service to the community) as a way to honor our loved ones in Puerto Rico. The meditation allowed for feelings of grief to surface and helped create a community among participants. It was also a chance to validate them in their challenge. Most importantly, it was a way for them to know that there was a way that their hands didn't have to be tied. What were originally experienced as students' feelings of selfishness for focusing on their education were reframed as their academic accomplishments being community accomplishments, which would in turn aid their families. The fruits of their work and hearts make a difference no matter the distance.

Lynnette's work in supporting the emotional healing work of our students shows the link between our hurricane relief work and the mission of our institute. In creating culturally-responsive leaders, we model the importance of self-awareness and self-care, which are expressed by sharing our feelings in a safe space and engaging in reframing as a tool to support student resilience. Lynnette created an individualized meditation for this occasion (see Appendix).

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[8] Adelante is a Spanish word meaning "onward" and is also the name of an undergraduate certificate program for bilingual/bicultural undergraduate students at our university.

Lessons Learned

There were numerous lessons learned from our journey of shared emotions and efforts to support the survivors of Hurricane Maria. These lessons have crucial implications for social work.

It Is Critical to Name and Experience Emotions

As we shared in this reflection, we were faced with the challenge of keeping the class (or meeting) moving during the trauma of Hurricane Maria. Some people might take an all-or-nothing approach to this, but the examples shared in our reflection show facilitators who connected that small group moment to the realities of the outside world while moving forward with the work with compassion. Michele took a pause with a student during an advising meeting. As LOOP members, we gave ourselves permission to go, as some might interpret, "off track" during a challenging meeting. Also, the faculty members compassionately found ways to allow the students to express themselves.

We also highlight that one does not always have to know what to say or have to know the perfect way to facilitate such a sensitive conversation as the answer does not lie with the facilitator serving as the sage on the stage; rather, it is present in the dynamics between the professor and his/her students. Madeline's strategy of collaborating with students to form agreed-upon classroom community rules served to support the group in digesting the devastating effect of Hurricane Maria as a shared responsibility. The classroom community rules were an example of Sole's (2006) strategy of shaping small groups (such as a class, but not limited to teaching scenarios) to operate as a concert rather than a performance. Sole (2006), paraphrasing rock superstar Bruce Springsteen explains, "A *performance* is something we do on stage for those in the audience. A concert is something we all do *together*" (p. 816). This philosophy is already a fabric of the LOOP meetings which allowed us to morph into developing creative ways to aid in the aftermath of the hurricane. By already having an orientation that the class is a "concert," the faculty members were better able to support students (and themselves) with getting through the semester.

The Importance of Collaboration and Social Capital

We have attempted to display a model for multi-stakeholder collaboration and to highlight how we responded to a lack of infrastructure at multiple levels. Our university did not have a central person assigned to work on Hurricane Maria relief, so we had to take leadership and hope people would listen to us as we decided to delegate and make decisions. Thankfully, people did listen to us. However, our multiple challenges in transporting supplies were much bigger than our school. It was important to be informed of these policies and structures, and, with humility, reach other people who may have connections to assist, such as Paula who served as a bridge between us and the local community group.

A Need for Increased Activism

We also recognized a need for increased activism within social work and other helping

professions around U.S. policies that impede aid to Puerto Rico regardless of profession, status, or role. Lin-Manuel Miranda transferred his skill sets for performing arts into skills used for activism; his recent project involves collaborating with the Hispanic Federation to raise money in aid relief (Miranda, 2017b). In that same spirit, we too use our tools for Puerto Rico—teaching, group facilitation, resource mobilization, and writing. We need to continue this work to aid the thousands of Puerto Ricans still on the island and those who are forcibly displaced throughout the United States and our hometown of Hartford, Connecticut.

Lastly, music brings us beauty, which is much needed in such difficult times.

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(Appendix begins on the following page.)

Appendix

Candle Meditation
Written by Lynnette Colón, LPC

In the Spirit of the present, I invite you to light your candles.

Now with the candles lit, I welcome you to look at your candle. See the beauty of this flame. Its movements. Its colors—the yellow, orange, red, blue. Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose. Exhale slowly through your mouth while still looking at your candle. Again, inhale slowly and deeply through your nose. Exhale slowly through your mouth while still looking at your candle. Now I invite you to look around and see all the candles here. Notice your candle is not alone. You are not alone.

Now, come back to your candle.

Take a moment to look at it and contemplate its existence. It exists as you do. With this in mind, I invite you to get comfortable in your chairs: feet flat on the ground, hands comfortably laying on your lap. Now close your eyes.

Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose. Exhale slowly through your mouth.

As you inhale, feel the coolness of your breath.

As you exhale, feel the warmth of your breath.

Continue to slowly inhale and exhale. With each exhale, feel your body more relaxed.

Your shoulders drop.

Your arms feel lighter.

Your legs weigh less.

Now, within the darkness, see your candle. See the light shine brightly.

It moves. It is alive within. Feel its warmth. See it illuminating your inner Self.

Feel its peace. Now, imagine the light of this candle growing and expanding—reaching out to your loved ones who are far away. Toward those whom you miss. Toward those whom you are worried about. See how your light surrounds them. See how these loved ones feel the warmth of your light, how your light moves within them, how your light lives within them, how your light illuminates them. Your light of love, your light of dedication, your light of empowerment, your light of service. The light of all you do reaches them and fills them with joy—EVEN FROM AFAR. Right now, your light for them is enough.

Feelings of guilt, sadness, desperation, anger may come into your presence. If so, that is ok. Acknowledge these feelings, for these feelings come from a place of love. They are parts in your journey. Do not run away from these feelings. Do not push them away. Let them in. Show these parts the light from your candle. Let these parts know there is always hope and that your light is enough and doing what it needs to do in the present. Let these parts feel the warmth. Let them feel your love.

As these parts see your light, let them pass along, weighing less.

Invite peace to enter.

Come, Spirit of Peace, come.

Invite peace to enter knowing your light illuminates and illuminates your loved ones.

Come, Spirit of Peace, come.

What does this peace look like? Is it a shape? Is it a color? Is it in the form of a symbol? Is it a person, a name, or a word? See it clearly—Your peace!

Come, Spirit of Peace, come.

Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose. Exhale slowly through your mouth. Bring your peace with you, knowing your light shines over your loved ones.

Come, Spirit of Peace, come.

Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose. Exhale slowly through your mouth. Bring your peace with you, knowing your light shines over your loved ones.

Come, Spirit of Peace, come.

We will inhale and exhale two more times.

Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose. Exhale slowly through your mouth. Bring your peace with you, knowing your light shines over your loved ones.

Come, Spirit of Peace, come.

As you inhale and exhale this last time, have the image of your peace clearly in your thoughts. Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose. Exhale slowly through your mouth.

Come, Spirit of Peace, Come.

At your pace, slowly open your eyes. See your candle. Take in one large inhale and one large

exhale.

Optional: If you like, when you are ready, you can choose to use a marker or paint brush and write out or draw the image of your peace. There is no perfection. It just is. You can draw it wherever on the paper.

Exposure

Jacqueline Corcoran

Abstract: This essay explores the challenges of psychotherapeutic work with adult clients who have suffered trauma as children. It discusses the evidence for best practices and how to respectfully integrate client preferences as described in the evidence-based practice process. Despite this knowledge, there are gaps between evidence-based practices as presented in research studies and the reality of putting them into practice in real-world settings.

A white woman in her early 30s sat across from me wearing an identical jacket. The khaki jacket, fitted and accessorized with metal detailing, was made of a soft, comfortable twill. My client, Tabitha, and I kept wearing the same jacket on the same day we saw each other.

She now covered her face with a scarf. "I can't do this."

I leaned forward. "Keep breathing." I took a deep breath myself to demonstrate. I tried to slow my speech to emanate calm. I didn't think a person could decompensate from a therapy session but felt we were close. "Put both your feet on the floor." I uncrossed my legs, following my own instruction, even though Tabitha couldn't see me from under her scarf. "You're okay. You survived. Breathe in slowly." My chest expanded and the jacket encased my rib cage. "Let it out slowly." The jacket loosened as my body shrunk from exhaling.

"I can't do this," she said again. She flung off the scarf, ejected herself from the couch, and ran out the door.

"Tabitha!" I called after her.

I heard the squeak of the front door to the reception area. She had left the suite.

I sat in my failure, feeling like a student again, even though I had over 25 years of experience working with sexual abuse victims. What had I done wrong?

I reviewed my methods. I had followed the research-supported treatment for trauma: trauma-focused cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT). Cognitive-behavioral therapy, in general, as the hyphenated name implies, focuses on behavior and its reinforcements, as well as people's beliefs and thoughts—their *cognitions*. However, *exposure* is the defining feature of trauma-focused interventions. Exposure involves the process of coming to terms with abuse-related associations and memories by examining them in detail within the supportive context of therapy rather than avoiding them. *Avoidance* is assumed to underlie people's failure to deal with abuse and other trauma. Unable to tolerate the anxiety aroused by cues and memories of the trauma, people avoid them and, thus, can't process through the abuse and resolve it.

My first job out of a master's degree in social work was working with child sexual abuse victims in the early 1990s, conducting forensic interviews for the Austin, Texas police department. At that point, this work still involved the use of anatomical dolls, although that has gone out of fashion now. By their construction, the dolls may invite sexual curiosity and exploration, possibly resulting in false positives of abuse when it may not be present. My job was to video-record the interviews for the police case and provide crisis counseling to victims and their parents. From the earliest point in my career as a social worker, I've been eliciting and hearing detailed accounts of abuse, although I didn't know then about exposure and its role in treatment.

During that time, my career goal was to treat children after they made what we refer to as *the disclosure*, which was beyond the crisis counseling that I provided. After I left that job, I attended a one-year post-graduate clinical training and then received a PhD in social work. As an academic, I embraced the evidence-based practice movement that social work adopted in the early 2000s. The standard definition of evidence-based practice that originally came from medical school training involves a process of decision-making for providers. Providers need to find out the best available evidence or research support for treating a particular problem. They also need to weigh this knowledge with agency resources and their own training to determine whether they can provide the research-supported practice. The final ingredient is whether clients, when educated about their options, prefer to use the science-backed method. I bought the argument that you wouldn't want your medical doctor to not know the latest studies on your particular problem before prescribing an intervention. For emotional, behavioral, and psychological problems, why wouldn't there be the same standard of care?

In evidence-based practice, there are various views on what constitutes evidence. The one I subscribe to is from medicine, which considers the meta-analysis the go-to study. Meta-analysis involves a comprehensive review of all studies that have been done on a topic, quantifying them together in an overall statistic. In this way, meta-analysis can tell us much more than the individual studies and can summarize an entire body of knowledge.

As a way to develop and archive these kinds of in-depth reviews, an international organization called the Cochrane Collaboration acts as a repository. Two such Cochrane reviews relate to the treatment of trauma and sexual abuse. Bisson, Roberts, Andrew, Cooper, and Lewis (2013) conducted a systematic review of therapy studies for people with chronic post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (over three months). According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, the symptom profile for PTSD involves a traumatic event and an aftermath of four symptom areas: 1) re-experiencing the trauma; 2) avoidance of memories; 3) arousal and reactivity; and 4) cognitive and mood disturbance (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Bisson et al. (2013) located 70 randomized controlled trials, which are considered the gold standard for research. In all, trauma-focused CBT and eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (which many consider another type of exposure therapy) outperformed other therapies like non-trauma-focused CBT and psychodynamic therapy. However, there was also more drop-out in exposure-based therapies (as well as in the regular CBT treatment) than the other therapies. The hypothesis about the drop-out is the difficulty of clients being able to tolerate the anxiety of facing the details of the abuse.

All different types of trauma were represented in the Bisson et al. (2013) meta-analysis, but Wilen (2014) only centered on the specific trauma of sexual abuse occurring in childhood. The results of her dissertation indicated that trauma-centered approaches were more effective at treating PTSD symptoms while present-focused approaches were more effective in treating depression symptoms.

Tabitha had originally come to therapy wanting to get back together with a same-sex romantic partner in Thailand, where Tabitha had taught English. The romantic partner was an American businesswoman who, when their break-up had turned nasty, accused Tabitha of needing therapy. I suspected that Tabitha had hoped that therapy would win this woman back, a not uncommon motive for seeking treatment.

I had a difficult time getting underneath Tabitha's superficiality and people-pleasing. Our main connection seemed to be that we kept wearing the same jacket. We agreed it went with everything, although we didn't mention to each other they had come from Target. She said her mother had bought hers, although Tabitha had only described her mother as critical. Tabitha's mother supposedly did not know about her sexual orientation, even though Tabitha had been involved with girls since adolescence and Tabitha was currently living in her house.

Tabitha's mother was also financially supporting her since she didn't have any means. Despite being in her mid-30s, Tabitha didn't hold marketable job skills. Exploration of her teaching experience led me to conclude that she didn't have a degree, certification, or licensure in teaching. She claimed that a difficult co-worker in her previous job was the reason she wouldn't get a good reference from the Thailand job. Thus, prospects for future overseas jobs were bleak.

When I mentioned to Tabitha her tendency to stay on the surface in as gentle a way as possible so as not to arouse her defenses, Tabitha admitted she wanted "rainbows and unicorns." Tabitha, with great reluctance, finally accepted the break-up and no longer fantasized about returning to live in Thailand with her ex-girlfriend. Although she adamantly wanted to keep coming to therapy, she wasn't clear on what she wanted to work on next beyond a vague goal of self-improvement. Her future career goals were similarly ill-formed. She talked about either going to film school or getting an undergraduate degree in biology.

As the sessions wore on and we delved into childhood, she revealed sexual abuse by an older cousin when she was about five. I explained the possible role of unexplored trauma in people who have trouble with current-day functioning. Tabitha did not seem to meet the criteria for PTSD. She denied nightmares, flashbacks, depression, and anxiety, but she did avoid thinking or talking about the abuse. I explained how trauma-focused treatment worked and warned that it meant directly confronting her memories. She was agreeable to going this route.

After that, we started the first step, which was for her to gain practice in being able to calm herself since discussion about the abuse might prove anxiety-producing. I coached her on deep breathing and progressive muscle relaxation in the session and prescribed practicing these skills for five minutes a day. I told her about being able to find YouTube videos on these techniques, gave her Dr. Kristin Neff's website with some free meditations on self-compassion

(http://self-compassion.org/category/exercises/), and mentioned some apps that other clients had found helpful in doing this work.

The next step was to formulate a hierarchy of memories in rough order of how difficult they were to talk about. The theory is that with exposure to the memories by activating and processing them in a supportive context, the anxiety associated with each one would eventually dissipate. No longer avoiding the memories, clients can integrate the experience, understand how it has led to faulty cognitions about the self (e.g., "The abuse was my fault."), about others (e.g., "People will hurt me."), and about the world (e.g., "The world is a dangerous place."). Once these are brought to the client's awareness, they are deconstructed to determine the extent to which they are realistic. Clients can then choose and practice alternative beliefs that offer a healthier and more functional perspective.

At the time of the abuse, Tabitha's mother had left with Tabitha's siblings, running away from a supposed hex that she believed her husband's family had put on her. Tabitha was left with her father, his sister, and her sister's children. Tabitha's aunt was, therefore, in charge of Tabitha, her own children, and her other sister's children at times, including a 14-year-old boy.

Tabitha was initially flattered by her 14-year-old cousin's attention when he wanted to watch TV with her in a bedroom—"I remember thinking, 'Hey, that's pretty cool. He wants to hang out with me.'"—until his attention became weird and confusing.

Tabitha told her aunt after several such events, who, in turn, revealed it to her sister, the mother of the 14-year-old. The mother came over and confronted Tabitha, placing a towel around her neck. She kept asking Tabitha if it happened and would noose the towel closer each time Tabitha said yes.

"Did it happen?"

"Yes." Tighter went the towel.

"Did it happen?"

"Yes." The nubs of the towel scratched against her skin as the noose grew closer.

"It didn't happen, did it?"

"Yes, it did."

"Did it happen?"

At that point, Tabitha feared strangulation if she didn't retract her statement. She swallowed, her voice already hoarse, and gave in. "No," she said.

After Tabitha ran out of the suite, I gave her a few minutes and then sought her out. When I

opened the bathroom door across the hall and called her name, she answered from a locked stall.

I found myself relieved she was still in the building—and still alive. "How are you doing?" I asked, recognizing how woefully inadequate the phrase was.

"Not good."

"It's up to you, okay, but do you want to just come in and talk a bit, just to calm down? I don't want you driving like this."

"I'll be fine," she said. "I'm going to stay in here for a while."

"Take your time."

I felt terrible leaving her in the bathroom, but I couldn't force her to come back either.

That was the end of our treatment. Tabitha left that day without speaking to me. She didn't respond for a few months to the email I sent inquiring after her well-being and asking if she wanted to schedule another appointment to talk about what had happened. The epilogue to my work with Tabitha was a nice email two months afterward saying, though some of the sessions had been helpful, she wasn't up to the kind of work we were doing.

Up until then, she had been so cooperative. Now, I realized, too cooperative. She had passively gone along with my recommendation for treatment—since she didn't have goals other than getting her girlfriend back—until it became too painful. I pride myself on being able to read clients well and being sensitive to their responses, but I didn't pick up on the fact that Tabitha was going to be unable to do this work. She didn't seem to have the ability to set a boundary until it was too late, and she saw no other option than leaving therapy.

Recall that in the Bisson et al. (2013) meta-analysis, drop-out was higher in the more trauma-focused treatments, likely because of what clients experience, similar to what Tabitha experienced. Experts in the area of sexual abuse treatment, Briere and Scott (2014) and Foa, Hembree, and Rothbaum (2007), talk about the necessity of monitoring exposure-based work to make sure it's not overwhelming the client's capacity to manage it. Foa et al. (2007) talk about frequently assessing Subjective Units of Distress, a 1-to-10 scale of the amount of anxiety the client is experiencing. In my experience, clients find the continuous requests to quantify their experiences annoying, so I haven't taken up this practice. Perhaps I should have done so in this case. Most of the time, when women are talking about the details of abuse, they will cry and there is marked emotional release. However, Tabitha never cried in our sessions, even when the scarf was over her head.

It's a fine line between working respectfully within the boundaries of the client's capacity to manage, and, at the same time, not facilitating avoidance. In exposure-based work, avoidance by the client is itself to be avoided since it is part of the negative reinforcement cycle. People feel anxiety due to cues or memories and then push them away, never habituating and getting past

them. Unfortunately, avoidance as a coping strategy is reinforced.

I'm still doing the exposure-based work with other sexual abuse victims, and also with those who have been physically abused, have witnessed domestic violence, or have suffered a life-threatening medical crisis. In all these cases, people admit that I am the only person to which they have confessed the details of the trauma. I recognize the honor of filling this special role: encouraging them to tell their story in a supportive context where they can safely explore the messages they internalized from the experience.

However, it's never the breakthrough—or even progress—I expect. CBT tells us to be realistic in our thoughts. Perhaps it is not realistic to look for breakthroughs and immediate benefits, but instead accept the "layers of the onion" theory—that our work has resulted in some significant peeling back of a layer of pain, secrecy, and confusion. Maybe that's enough and more than other approaches might achieve, even though the peeling back can be painful in itself.

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Transformative Learning Based on Disability: My Disrupting Dilemma

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Abstract: A social work educator's experience of temporary disability that was precipitated by an intra-operative femoral fracture creates a disruptive dilemma leading to a process of transformative learning. According to Mezirow (1991, 1994), a disorienting dilemma is precipitated by a life experience which induces powerful emotional responses and results in a recognition that our old ways of thinking and acting are no longer sufficient. This disrupting dilemma is the beginning of a learning process according to Mezirow's phases of transformative learning, including critical reflection on living with a disability, social norms, and the psychosocial impact of ableism. Transformative learning leads to a pedagogical approach that facilitates critical discussion and reflection and allows for learning that integrates the ways in which assumptions about people with disabilities shape individual beliefs, values, and behaviors, and it makes space for the consideration of alternative perspectives that can be applied to social work practice.

Keywords: transformative learning, disability, disruptive dilemma, ableism

Introduction

The summer of 2015 brought with it an unexpected challenge that I have come to understand as a disorienting dilemma leading to transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991). That summer, I experienced life as a disabled person, resulting in profound changes in my cognitive and emotional consciousness. As a social work practitioner and educator for over 20 years, who trained in the generalist model of social work practice, I thought I had a solid working knowledge of disability and the ecosystem implications that come with daily life as a person who is differently abled, but I was wrong. Even though I had experience as a medical social worker, I still had much to learn.

For several years, I experienced aching, throbbing, stiffness, and shooting pains in my lower back, right hip, and right leg, which hindered my ability to walk. I managed to ignore the pain for a long time, rationalizing that I had muscle strain and just needed to stretch. I didn't want to acknowledge that I was not in perfect health. The idea that I might need to depend on someone or something other than my own body invoked fear and anxiety, which I masked by denial and avoidance. I now understand that the overwhelming physical and emotional vulnerability I felt could be traced to a lifetime of internalizing messages that to be less than healthy and whole is someway unworthy.

When I finally saw a doctor, I was diagnosed with osteoarthritis in my hip. I was advised to get an ultrasound-guided intra-articular injection directly into the hip joint to alleviate the pain, but I was warned that the results would be temporary. I felt immediate relief after getting the injection and resumed my life living in an illusory bubble of perfect health. As long as the injection worked, I did not have to confront the reality that my body was in chronic pain. I repeated this procedure two more times, with each period of relief getting shorter and less effective. When I

called to schedule a fourth procedure, I was told that I could not receive another injection. In fact, the injections may have caused further joint damage even as the pain was alleviated. I swallowed hard, and I contemplated the recommended total hip replacement with trepidation even as I was assured that hip replacement is the most common orthopaedic operation and that the results are generally favorable for a woman in her mid-50s with no complicating medical conditions.

An Unexpected Challenge

Once I accepted that surgery was the final option for alleviating the excruciating pain I now lived with on a daily basis, I began looking forward to the operation. I imagined myself moving pain-free and engaging in activities that I had not been able to do for a long time. I was convinced that I would recover quickly and be on my feet within a few short weeks. I envisioned myself walking, hiking, and horseback riding—all the things I slowly let go of over the past few years due to the increasing level of pain. I was so optimistic that I scheduled dates for activities a few weeks after surgery, which would have required me to be fully healed in order to drive, walk, and spend a good amount of time on my feet.

As I was wheeled into the operating room, I remember feeling gleeful anticipation at the prospect of regaining my health. Upon waking up in the hospital bed the next morning, I remember feeling relief that it was finally over, that my hip was fixed, and that I would shortly resume what I envisioned as my normal life. I immediately called my husband to let him know I was awake and all was well. Hesitantly, he asked if the doctor had been to see me. Haltingly, he told me my femur fractured during the procedure. I was still groggy at the time, which accounted for my complete lack of comprehension of what this would mean for my recovery.

The doctor informed me that I had experienced an intra-operative femoral fracture, which is a serious complication of total hip replacement surgery. The fracture occurred during the insertion of the femoral component of the artificial prosthesis that is used to reconstruct the hip joint. This necessitated the use of an encircling wire around the femur to hold the bone together while it mended. I learned that this is a rare event affecting less than 5% of hip replacement surgeries.

The femur is the largest bone in the body and requires an extended period of time to heal. The doctor told me that I could not put any weight on my leg, referring to this as touch-toe weight-bearing. I would need to use a walker for a minimum of six weeks without putting any weight on that leg. I could only place my toe lightly on the floor for balance and hop on the other leg while using the walker for mobility. After six weeks, I would be reevaluated and possibly transition to a cane for the next few months of recovery.

After spending a few uncomfortable days in the hospital, I was admitted to a rehabilitation facility where I learned how to use a walker safely, began a gentle exercise program, and practiced activities of daily living. My body, mind, and spirit were slow to grasp the implications of this new reality. As I slowly realized that I was disabled and would need help for the foreseeable future, I experienced a range of emotions from disbelief to anger to distress and desperation.

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) defines disability as a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities (United States Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, n.d.). The ADA does not specifically name all of the impairments that are covered; rather, the ADA considers disability as an umbrella term for impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. After my surgery, I joined the 33 million Americans who have a disability that makes it difficult to carry out daily activities and who need help with their daily care, and I joined the 6.5 million people who have limitations associated with ambulatory activities of the lower body, including difficulty walking, climbing stairs, and using a cane, crutches, and walker (National Institute for Child Health and Human Development, 2016).

Arthritis, also known as degenerative joint disease, is the main cause of disability in the United States, and according to a report from the Arthritis Foundation (2017), more than 50 million adults have been doctor-diagnosed with some type of arthritis. Common arthritic joint symptoms include swelling, pain, stiffness, and decreased range of motion, which result in chronic pain with increasing severity, inability to engage in daily activities, and difficulty walking and climbing stairs. Not only is physical health affected, but based on the Arthritis Foundation's report of Murphy's findings, "about one in three U.S. adults with arthritis, 45 years and older, report having anxiety or depression" (as cited in Arthritis Foundation, 2018, p. 9).

Transformative Learning Theory

The realization that I was disabled was the beginning of a disorienting dilemma, which led to a process of transformative learning. According to Mezirow (1994, 2000, 2003), a disorienting dilemma is precipitated by a life experience, usually a personal crisis, which induces powerful emotional responses and results in a recognition that our old ways of thinking and acting are no longer sufficient. This type of experience has the potential to generate deeper and more insightful ways of understanding and making meaning of ourselves and our experiences in the world (Mezirow, 2003).

Mezirow is the leading proponent of the theory of transformative learning. Theories of transformation are conceptualized as learning that integrates our experiences of the outer world with the experience of our inner worlds (Dirkx, 2008; Dirkx, Mezirow, & Cranston, 2006), learning experiences which shape the learner and produce a significant impact or paradigm shift (Clark, 1993), and an orientation to learning and knowing that is often accompanied by a change in assumptions, beliefs, and values (Witkin, 2014).

Mezirow (2000) believes a prerequisite for transformative learning is to bring long-held frames of reference into awareness. This enables learners to critically reflect on their frames, become aware of how they restrict their thinking, and act in new ways to redefine their world. Mezirow (1994) suggests that this type of learning follows a process of identifiable phases, which result in cognitive, emotional, and behavioral changes, which result in a transformation of how we make meaning of experience. My process closely resembled Mezirow's phases of transformative

learning. The phases are:

1. a disorienting dilemma;
2. a self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame;
3. a critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions;
4. recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change;
5. exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions;
6. planning a course of action;
7. acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plan;
8. provisional trying of new roles;
9. building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships; and
10. a reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's perspective (Mezirow, 2000).

The phases follow a progression beginning with the first phase of a disorienting dilemma, which can range from a gradual awareness over a period of time or an abrupt personal crisis—both leading to a disconnection between our meaning structure and our environment. The next two phases involve critical reflection into deep levels of cognitive and emotional states. The next two phases represent rational discourse through contact and communication with others who assist in the exploration of the disorienting dilemma. The final phases involve increasing activity and action leading to the integration of newly discovered knowledge and meaning in one's life. The process of reflectivity is central to transformative learning in that "taken-for-granted cultural or psychological assumptions" (Mezirow, 1981, p. 13) are deeply examined.

Phases of Transformative Learning

As I healed over the course of a year, I experienced painful and powerful emotional responses, which resulted in a shift in meaning that my previous ways of thinking and acting did not sufficiently explain. I discovered that my experiences created pathways to deepening my perceptions and generating more insightful ways of making meaning of disability, both on individual and societal levels. I had time to reflect on living with a disability, my identity and place in society, and the discrimination that I encountered in various settings. Ableism became a personal part of my world, and my body, mind, and spirit were impacted by the discrimination and social prejudice against people with disabilities, which I had not previously encountered. The following section presents an application of Mezirow's (2000) ten phases of transformative learning that I experienced based on my disability.

1. A Disorienting Dilemma

The realization that I was disabled and would need substantial help for an extended period of time was disorienting and precipitated a crisis in maintaining my identity as an independent adult woman. My disorientation was learning to see through the cultural lens of disability. The circumstances were beyond my control, and I was frustrated by the limitations imposed by using a walker to support my weight as I navigated physical spaces. I was surprised when spaces were

not accessible, and I remember my fear of falling when encountering a curb or being stuck and unable to go up or down steps. While I had an intellectual understanding that I could expect a full recovery, the intensity of my feeling of vulnerability was a palpable sensation, which clashed with my sense of self as a capable, self-sufficient woman. It was this clash that triggered a disrupting dilemma with the ensuing feelings of anxiety and depression.

2. Self-Examination with Feelings of Guilt or Shame

I felt shame at being disabled and guilt about my reaction to this new reality. I experienced a range of emotions, including frustration, fear, hopelessness, anxiety, and depression. I had difficulty asking for help, preferring to struggle with minor activities rather than appear incapable, and I struggled to maintain self-esteem. Through the difficulties of my recovery period, I had to acknowledge the painful awareness that I had bought into the belief that being able-bodied is the normal human condition while, in contrast, being "disabled" is linked to ill health, incapacity, and dependence (McLean, 2011). These feelings were indicative of an unconscious, internalized belief that disability is something that happens to other people. Realizing that I participate in an ableist society (where most people, if not everyone, are shaped by prejudice toward individuals with disabilities) was difficult to accept. I had to change my frame of reference to accept that disability is not a deficit or personal failing but can happen to anyone at any time.

3. A Critical Assessment of Epistemic, Sociocultural, or Psychic Assumptions

The discomfort I experienced asking for help led me to a more critical assessment of the ways that societal norms value bodies that can function independently without a need for assistance. This was brought to my attention when I encountered a coworker who vehemently exclaimed, "I hate seeing you this way!" I became acutely aware of the social constructions that cast people with disabilities as damaged objects by "simply moving through their everyday environments, in addition to the concrete aspects of physical limitations and discomfort in their daily life," (Michilin & Juarez-Marazzo, 2007, p. 206).

4. Recognition That One's Discontent and the Process of Transformation Are Shared and That Others Have Negotiated a Similar Change

The time I spent in the rehabilitation facility allowed me to experience a sense of community and connection with others who were experiencing similar challenges navigating physical space due to knee or hip replacements and other various chronic conditions. I had conversations with patients and medical staff, which helped me cope with my feelings and decrease my anxiety and emotional isolation. Physical and occupational therapy taught me alternative methods to manage daily activities. The feeling of isolation was alleviated by knowing that others had experienced what I was experiencing and had learned to cope and find alternative, often creative, ways to meet their needs.

5. Exploration of Options for New Roles, Relationships, and Actions

My disability had a large impact on my family members as they were also impacted by the changes in household routines. Family roles were forced to accommodate the need to maintain household tasks and responsibilities. Trying to manage through these changes was an ongoing effort that strained relationships and caused an imbalance in otherwise stable relationships. It was difficult to acknowledge that my disability was perceived negatively at times and caused anxiety within my family system. Improving family communication became a major activity in order to increase mutual understanding and support while acknowledging and negotiating different needs and perspectives.

6. Planning a Course of Action

With the approach of the fall semester, I contemplated my options for returning to my position as a faculty member (with the requisite teaching and programmatic responsibilities) or deciding whether to take medical leave. After some deliberation, I chose not to take leave but rather to adapt my recovery needs to my responsibilities. The main reason for my decision was the anticipation of transitioning to weight-bearing with the use of a cane. I had begun to bear weight while using the walker, and use of the cane would be the next step. In retrospect, I recognized that I pushed myself to return to work before I had fully recovered in an effort to regain the routine that I associated with my former self. I found the responsibilities of my position reassuring, challenging, and exhausting. I was able to teach my courses and have good interactions with students and colleagues, but I was also aware that there were some who expressed concern about my ability to maintain my responsibilities.

7. Acquisition of Knowledge and Skills for Implementing One's Plan

During my recovery period, I decided to spend some time learning about the culture of disability. My aim was to educate myself in order to improve my teaching so that my students could benefit from my enhanced understanding of the available services, benefits, and programs. I familiarized myself with the social model of disability, which views disability as a societal construct rather than a medical impairment and frames disability as a social, collective issue caused by the physical environment rather than an individual failing (Mackelprang & Salsgiver, 2016). This model rests on the principle that people are disabled by barriers in society, not by their impairment or difference. Structural barriers can be physical, such as inappropriate or inaccessible services, and another barrier includes people's attitudes, such as making assumptions about disabled people that limit their options and opportunities. I learned about the importance of practicing inclusive language, as many people who need disability benefits and services don't identify with the term "disabled," preferring the use of "people with health conditions or impairments." The importance of using positive language that respects disabled people as active individuals with control over their own lives was reinforced over and over again as a basic approach.

8. Provisional Trying of New Roles

I was learning to adapt and to see my disability as a source of strength and resilience. I was open in communicating about my medical procedure, disability, and subsequent experiences to my

students. This was necessary for me to feel comfortable in my role as an instructor, especially as I worked to foster a learning community approach that valued and encouraged all voices and points of view. Students responded positively to discussing their experiences with disabilities—or "diverse-abilities," which was a term some students preferred—which would not have otherwise been discussed. Opening the discussion allowed students to share their lived experiences, and it supported their skills to empathize in ways that could not have happened without the personal narratives.

9. Building Competence and Self-Confidence in New Roles and Relationship

The necessity of using a mobility aid led me to shifts in perceptions and insights about my identity and relationships. I confronted my initial fear and negativity, and I learned to shift my attitude toward a more positive and self-affirming standpoint, thus changing the focus from disability to accessibility. I was fortunate in that I had social and professional supports that prevented isolation and sustained my competence and sense of mastery.

10. A Reintegration into One's Life on the Basis of Conditions Dictated by One's Perspective

As my recovery progressed, I realized that I would not be perfectly "fixed," and I accepted that, but I also became determined that my health status would not be defined by external judgments. My perspective on health is now more nuanced. I do not see health status through a binary lens of good or poor, of something one has or does not have, but rather as a continuum of abilities that fluctuate depending on both internal and external abilities, strategies, and resources. I had the opportunity of seeing my environment through the cultural lens of disability and learned first-hand about the ecosystemic impact of ableism. My perceptions and feelings were altered to make room for an identity based on resilience and adaptation to efficacious ways to navigate spaces in the world. All children and adults have the human right to grow and thrive in their environments, to use both public and private services, to take advantage of the same education and employment opportunities, and to partake in events and activities as everyone else does. I learned that disability needs to be understood from the perspective of diversity and that there is a need for disability to be addressed at the social, economic, and political levels of our society.

Transformative Learning about Disability

In keeping with the final phase of reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's perspective, I am determined to more fully integrate learning about disability and ableism into my teaching. My aim is to facilitate students' learning about disabilities and ableism early in their social work education through theoretical knowledge and understanding; by empathizing with the challenges that persons with disabilities face; and more importantly, by gaining skills to address the ways in which the ecosystemic problem of ableism adversely affect individuals and families. Individuals and families impacted by disabilities can benefit from social work services that address clients' concerns related to psychosocial challenges, services, programs, and mental health in competent and meaningful ways.

Dupré (2012) suggests that despite recognition of the importance of cultural and social diversity in social education and practice, social work remains entrenched in a view of disability as a problem or as a condition based on individual defects and functional limitations. I needed to experience my own disability in order to fully grasp this reality. Furthermore, Dupré (2012) asserts that there is a dearth of contemporary social work literature related to disability culture. Thus, theoretical learning and empathetic understanding related to research into practices and dominant attitudes in society that devalue and limit the potential of persons with disabilities are critical components of social work curricula. Transformative learning theory can provide an organizing framework for social work education as an approach that facilitates critical pedagogy, discussion, and reflection that can also be applied to social work practice (Jones, 2009).

Planning for Teaching in the Classroom

People with disabilities are invisible in our society (Michilin & Juarez-Marazzo, 2007), and others don't usually put themselves in the shoes of those with disabilities; rather, they evaluate themselves and their environment based on their own abilities and miss the ways that people with disabilities may be excluded. Students who do not have a disability or who are not close to someone who does might not understand how the world is wired for nondisabled people and how their challenges are often invisible. Social work students need to comprehend that ableism becomes institutionalized in the beliefs, language, and practices of nondisabled people and creates systemic barriers to equitable social participation for many disabled people (McLean, 2011).

The social model of disability recognizes that disability affects every aspect of our lives, not just our health. Disability needs to be understood from the perspective of cultural diversity and must be recognized and addressed at micro, mezzo, and macro levels. As Mackelprang and Salsgiver (2016) proclaim, "We celebrate disability as an important piece of the great mosaic of diversity that makes up our society" (p. xv). Longmore found that an understanding of disability culture can provide students with a theoretical framework and insights into understanding how people with disabilities affirm and celebrate the existence of disability culture as distinguished from mainstream culture because it differentiates between negative stereotypes promulgated by the dominant culture and more positive representations of difference (as cited in Dupré, 2012).

Discussion and reflection are the mainstays of teaching in social work classrooms. These methods have also been identified as foundational to creating transformational learning. Mezirow (1991) maintains that discussion with others is integral to adult learning and development. Furthering this method, Cranton (1994) suggests that discussion guidelines ensure an atmosphere of trust, safety, and respect in the classroom in which learners can feel comfortable expressing their ideas. Guidelines that promote shared values such as respect, active listening, and participation are often explicitly stated in social work curricula and classrooms. These values also play a role in shaping reflection processes. Mezirow (1990) asserts that through reflection, individuals often arrive at "a more inclusive, differentiated, permeable and integrated perspective" (p. 14).

One of the most important elements of knowledge possessed by effective social workers is that

which comes from knowing personal values and beliefs concerning disability (Mackelprang & Salsgiver, 2016). Class discussions and reflections can be structured in large or small groups and can be guided by questions from the instructor, be based on students' own experiences and narratives, or entail a response to lecture and media materials. To encourage critical reflection, instructors may have students engage in role plays. In particular, role reversal activities help learners to explore and express views other than their own, which could encourage them to broaden their perspectives (Cranton, 1994). Another technique involves a method of journal writing in which learners use one side of the page for observations and descriptions and the other side for thoughts, feelings, related experiences, or images provoked by the description (Cranton, 1994).

The transformative learning in the classroom leads to social work practice that is informed by empathy and is ultimately based on developing resiliency as a strategy for professional use of self as well as fostering resiliency within client populations. Using the strategies of transformative learning, students will be better prepared to explore individual, family, and cultural resources that can address social conditions and barriers created by ableism. In keeping with Michilin and Juarez-Marazzo's (2007) assertion that workers need to enhance dignity and instill hope, students will be better equipped to aid clients in meaning-making about disability and its impact and meaning for the individual and family system.

All of these strategies point to the role of the instructor in creating a learning environment that is conducive to critical discussion and reflection. Teaching for transformational learning involves establishing dynamic relationships between and among learners, creating a shared body of knowledge to promote learning through various methods, and allowing for personal growth to flourish in the classroom. From this perspective, instructors not only aim toward helping students acquire key course concepts, but they also work to enhance students' personal development and attitudes toward learning (Slavitch & Zimbardo, 2012). This approach to teaching and learning is based on an atmosphere of openness, safety, and emotional support, where instructors and students have full information and are free from coercion, have equal opportunity to assume various roles, are critically reflective of assumptions, and are willing to search for common ground or a synthesis of different points of view (Cooper, n.d.).

Teaching Challenges

The challenge for social work educators is to integrate transformational learning theory into their current styles of teaching. While it is consonant with a range of existing social work teaching methods focused on reflective, dialogic, and experiential approaches that foster learning, critical thinking, and empathy, it can be a challenge to manage various student responses and reactions on both objective and subjective levels. An empathic awareness can be fostered when students learn about the effects of ableist societal views and begin to contrast the conditions in their own lives with those prevailing for disabled people and their families. McLean (2011) points out that students must recognize the often discomforting discovery of structures of privilege and disadvantage inherent in institutionalized social positions, and she uses an example of the realization that categorization as disabled is something nondisabled people do to others.

In social work education, students may experience intense emotions resulting from the recognition and awareness of the effect of personal involvement in discriminatory social practices. Instructors must allow for these types of reactions while also managing the experience for the individual and impact of the classroom as a whole. It is important to use these experiences as a teaching moment, recognizing that the affective dimension of learning also provides the substance for reflection that promotes the transformation of perspectives (Taylor, 2006).

Summary

Transformative learning theory provides a useful guide to navigate unexpected challenges, such as presented in this narrative about disability. I gained new levels of perception, understanding, and action into how people with disabilities experience life on a daily basis and cope with the impact of ableism. As in life, powerful emotional responses also arise in the classroom, and these types of learning experiences have the potential to create shifts in making meaning that previously utilized ways of thinking and acting do not sufficiently explain. The phases of transformative learning define pathways to knowledge and action that have the potential to create individual and social change.

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At the Heart of Social Justice: Using Scholarly Personal Narrative to Explore the Role of Spirituality in My Pursuit for Social Justice

Tiffany Talen

Abstract: "What motivates your pursuit for social justice?" This question had been posed by a professor of one of the author's social work classes. The difficulty the author faced in answering the question led her on a journey to deconstruct the personal motives behind her passion for social justice. In this paper, the author uses personal narrative to share this journey. She first offers reflections on her early moments of awareness of social injustice and explores the extent to which these experiences motivate her desire for social change. She then wrestles with her inability to understand her motives when using dominant, scientific, and highly individualized explanations. Next, she explores the motivating forces of interconnectedness, compassion, and love, and she explores the relationship between spirituality, social work, and social justice. The author explains how she has come to understand the important role of spirituality within her personal social work identity and suggests implications for social work education and practice.

Keywords: spirituality, social work, social justice, social work education, social work practice

I was surrounded by a room full of passionate students on the first day of my social work course titled, Diversity, Oppression and Social Justice, when the question was posed: "What motivates your pursuit for social justice?" In answering this question, each of the professors who facilitated the class shared personal moments in their lives that had influenced and motivated them to pursue social change and to strive for a world that is more just. The class moved on with the session's agenda; however, the question continued to prod me: What motivates *my* pursuit for social justice? The difficulty I faced in answering this question challenged me to deconstruct the motives behind my personal pursuit for social justice.

In this paper, I use scholarly personal narrative (Nash, 2004) to share my journey of questioning and discovery that I have experienced in attempts to answer this question. I share my reflections on early memories and experiences of social injustice and explore the extent to which these motivate my desire for social change. I then wrestle with my inability to fully understand my motives when using dominant, scientific explanations. Next, I explore the motivating forces of interconnectedness, compassion, and love, and I explore the relationship between spirituality and social justice. I explain how I have come to understand the importance of spirituality within my personal social work identity and suggest implications that this could offer to social work education and practice.

Reflecting on Early Memories

On that Friday afternoon after a busy week of work and classes, you would think that my mind would have been primarily focused on getting home and relaxing; however, my thoughts were far from relaxed. I was still attempting to pin down an answer to the question, what motivates my pursuit for social justice? Following my professors' examples, my mind had drifted back to

my childhood.

When I was nine years old, my parents began welcoming foster children into our family. Eventually, an extra bed was set up in my room and my new foster sister moved in. At first, it was awkward. She was very quiet, but we soon became friends and found ourselves staying up late at night sharing giggles, stories, and secrets. I learned a lot about the world from her and from other foster sisters who came to live with us in the years that followed. My heart was broken and my innocence was lost as I realized that the world in many ways was a much fouler place than I had known it to be. I have held tightly to many of the secrets and tears that they shared with me. I know that they have been significant motivators throughout my life on my pursuit for social change.

When I was twelve years old, I learned about a woman who was in her 30s who had a disability and had recently been moved into a nursing home in my town. She was likely the only person under the age of 80 living in this facility. I remember overhearing a family friend telling my mother something to the effect of, "She's functionally about 12 years old and is not adjusting well. Nobody comes to visit her." I was 12 years old. I couldn't imagine how lonely she must have felt. I don't remember all the details, but I do remember the pain I felt inside when I heard her story. I decided I would go meet her. We became friends and I ended up visiting her almost every week for the next six years. Together we made crafts and scrapbooked, and occasionally we would bend the rules by leaving the institution and going off the property with deviant smiles. Despite the challenges of getting around in her power chair, we would go on little adventures to explore the neighbourhood. She also shared stories and tears with me. Deep down it felt wrong that she lived where she did and was isolated the way she was, which was another layer of motivation for my social justice pursuit.

I discovered at a young age that I learned differently than most kids at school, but it wasn't until my first year of university that I was diagnosed with a "learning disability." I vividly remember in middle school advocating for myself by challenging a teacher because I believed the method on which I was being evaluated was unfair. I remember my teacher's response to my concern. She said bluntly, "Life isn't fair." I snapped back, "Then let's make it fair!" My own challenges and tears through those years have stuck with me and have given me a desire and a motivation for justice regarding the way people who are "different" are treated.

Of course, my thoughts continued swimming in other examples that kept flooding my mind. All were experiences where I saw the results of injustice and I looked them in the eye—in the eyes of people who I've met or worked with who were suffering from the social, economic, and political dimensions of inequalities in our world. I began seeing the faces of those who I have connected with over the years who have motivated me: those in foster care, slums, orphanages, or homeless shelters and friends being negatively impacted by the effects of climate change or by the ongoing oppressive forces of colonization. My mind kept swimming through those layers and layers of motivation until I realized that I wasn't fully answering the question.

Pushing the Question Further

What motivates my pursuit for social justice? The experiences alone cannot encompass the entirety of the answer. I began to dig deeper. *Why* did these experiences with others and with myself each stir in me extreme emotions resulting in motivations to work toward creating a reality that is different, that is more just? *Why* did these experiences stir in me deep sadness or outrage that made my stomach feel sick or caused my jaw to tighten and my fists to clench, pushing me to write a letter, stand in a protest, to make sacrifices, or put myself at risk to advocate for others? *Why*?

My science background suggested that perhaps the source or the reason behind this motivation is simply a biological instinct that pushes me to act in ways that benefit or enhance the survival of my herd or species. If this is true, then my biological instincts have conditioned me to label whatever benefits my herd as good or just and whatever does not benefit my herd as bad or unjust and in need of change. While I do not deny the influence of biological instincts in my life that are part of the human "struggle for existence" (Darwin, 1968, p. 60), I believe this suggestion ignores higher orders of human consciousness and emotions and leaves me with a sense of alienation from purpose and meaning in life. The ideological framework of Western science, which suggests that the physical world is the only reality, does not encourage me to challenge oppressive forces in society in pursuit of equality and justice. Rather, it leads me towards an individualistic mindset that encourages the pursuit of convenience, greed, and materialism. Korten (2006) explains that understanding the world as a mere collection of chemicals and genetic codes subject to physical manipulation for human convenience has influenced the worldview of modern culture and has contributed more to practices of exploitation and oppression than to strides toward social justice.

These questions and thoughts have pushed me to acknowledge that my pursuit for social justice is more than a biological instinct required to enhance the survival of my species. This cognitive journey has helped me to understand that there is a reality beyond the physical which influences my motivations. Surfacing within this reality are values and beliefs I hold regarding life as an embodiment of the sacred—that all people are interconnected through a spiritual realm and that our individual differences are all part of a collectively beautiful Creation. These values led to my desire for all people to be treated as equals and have fair, equitable opportunities to not only experience life but to experience it in its fullest. These beliefs allow me to picture a world where our relationships and social structures are designed to enable all people to experience the fullness of life, and that even through pain and death there is dignity and beauty. Social actions and structures which are incompatible with this picture, those which "turn the natural diversity of human beings into oppressive hierarchies," are ones which I have labeled as unjust (Solas, 2008, p. 821).

The examples from my childhood that I shared above all have something in common. Each involved a deepening in my understanding of my relationship with others, with myself, and with the world around me. Each involved a profound realization of the value, dignity, and worthiness of compassion and love inherent in all people and a sense of interconnectedness between one another. There was something far beyond the physical tears that connected me to others and to myself, and that changed the way that I think about "difference." When I push the quest for my motivations for social justice beyond the physical experience, I arrive at what I am calling the

heart of social justice, a very abstract, spiritual reality where love and compassion allow for the thriving relationship between diversity and connection. Prompted by a brief discussion in a classroom, this journey of questioning has helped me to understand and describe my work and my pursuit for social justice as forms of spiritual practice.

Throughout this journey, however, I have also come to realize that discussing spirituality within the social work classroom, in my experience, has been a rare phenomenon. I have often felt isolated and uncomfortable when wanting to discuss spirituality, feeling that it is inappropriate to do so. I am not saying that the topic has never been explored in any of my classes, but when it has, it was very brief and typically focused on the need to respect others' spiritual beliefs. Very little space has been created within academia to discuss and explore how *personal* spirituality impacts who we are as social workers—how my spirituality is a major part of my social work identity.

However, a professor did recently say to me, "I can tell your MSW is not just a degree but a cry from your heart." This comment struck me deeply as it finally created space within an academic setting for me to acknowledge and explore the fact that my longing for a society based on values of equality, which strives for *all* people to experience the fullness of life, is more than a product of biological instincts and socialized norms (though I do not deny the influence of instincts and norms). I was able to acknowledge that my "heart" or my "spirit" is a significant part of what drives me to be the social worker I long to be. Although discussions with this professor regarding spirituality were brief, they were powerful for me. This space to acknowledge the spirit behind my pursuit was invigorating. Through realizing the important role of spirituality within my social work identity, while also realizing that this topic has been treated as a taboo throughout my social work education, left me wondering why this profession's distancing from spirituality seems to exist.

Complex Reasons for Silence

For many people, including myself, spirituality is difficult to describe, and in trying to define, categorize, or measure it, meaning is often lost. Since spirituality is idiosyncratic and complex, arriving at a single definition is not likely possible (Belcher & Sarmiento Mellinger, 2016). Moss (2012) explains that elements of spirituality are part of the richness of being human; however, they are "notoriously difficult to pin down or describe" (p. 606). While acknowledging that spirituality is an elusive topic which seems to defy definitions, Tisdell (2003) highlights three main themes of spirituality: development of self-awareness; a sense of honoring the interconnectedness among all things; and a relationship to a greater purpose, life force and sacred being (for example, what some may call Spirit, Creator, or God). Such elusive and multifaceted understandings of spirituality can leave people incapable of or uncomfortable with discussing the topic.

For many, the blurry lines between spirituality and religion add an additional element of complication to the topic. Coates (2007) acknowledges the relationship between the two while also assuring that religion and spirituality have taken on distinct meanings in contemporary usage. Religion has come to be known as an organized, structured system for beliefs, traditions,

doctrines, and rituals, while spirituality is a more encompassing term involving the search for meaning, purpose, and fulfillment in relationships with self, others, a higher power, and the environment. Individuals who identify as spiritual may or may not identify as religious (Belcher & Sarmiento Mellinger, 2016; Butot, 2007; Coates, 2007). Although they have separate meanings, spirituality may be coupled with religion, which often creates tension within the social work arena based on the complex history between social work and religion (Coates, 2007).

Butot (2007) addresses this complex relationship directly when she acknowledges the religious roots of the profession and states that "much of the historical religious social work practice (based primarily on EuroChristian values) was in function oppressive and an extension of colonization" (p. 150). In attempts to distance the profession from this history (which I would add, continues to exist in many ways today), many struggle with how to incorporate concepts of religion and spirituality into social work education and practice (Belcher & Sarmiento Mellinger, 2016).

Payne (2016) explains more broadly that within a society that values rational, seemingly neutral, and evidence-based approaches to professionalism, humanistic and spiritual elements of practice are "often a source of public criticism of social work for being vague and idealistic" and "may not be widely accepted among groups in society that social workers seek to influence" (p. 174). While many understand that their passion for social justice is the work of their souls, often grounded in their spiritual commitments, there are mainstream cultural taboos which keep professionals silent about their spirituality, especially in higher education (Tisdell, 2003). Moss (2012) explains that many scholars have questioned the usefulness of the concept of spirituality within social work and highlights that, "Freudian and Marxist analyses of religion and society fueled the suspicion that anything to do with religion or spirituality had to be eschewed" (p. 596). Social work, as it moved into the period of modernity, aligned itself with science by accepting a rational, linear, reductionist view of the world. Although the profession gained credibility by social and medical sciences, a separation from the spirituality discourse simultaneously resulted (Baskin, 2007).

Breaking the Silence

While there are many reasons for distancing social work from spirituality, doing so may be a great risk to the profession. Moss (2012) explains the importance of locating the spirituality discourse and exploring its relevance to social work:

> It reinforces and reminds us of the 'heart beat' of all social work; it respects and treasures human uniqueness; it urges us to take with the utmost seriousness the environment which both shapes us and is in turn shaped by us; and points us, even in the darkest times, to mystery, wonder and a sense of awe that we lose at our peril. (p. 610)

In terms of social justice, it is critical that concepts of "difference" and "other" do not erase our interdependence. Spirituality offers a framework for cherishing both diversity and unity. It is a

means to understand the coexistence of difference and interdependence. This understanding has great potential to inform our critical and emancipatory work in challenging intersecting systems of hierarchical oppressions (Butot, 2007).

Profitt (2010) reminds social workers that while it is important to understand the complex history of social work and oppressive religious forces, we must not fail to acknowledge spiritual motivations that have driven movements such as the labour, peace, feminist, welfare rights, civil rights, and indigenous movements. Profitt (2010) also highlights that many social work authors have described spirituality as a source of inspiration and sustainability for social justice work, which helps them to remain mindful of a larger purpose within their work.

Although social work is functioning within societal structures based on individualism, consumerism, and other neo-liberal ideologies (at least in Western societies), our profession must not bow to these forces. Upholding and maintaining core concepts of spirituality, such as sacred interconnectedness, can help us in challenging the ideologies which lead to the deterioration of communal cohesion. Defending the coexistence of diversity and unity can help us in challenging what it means to *belong*, what credentials define *success*, and how we construct the *other* (Butot, 2007) A spiritual framework can help in collectively defining and creating the sort of society we want for ourselves and for future generations (Holloway & Moss, 2010).

Butot (2007) warns that discussions of spirituality in contemporary social work often tend to be "depoliticized," primarily concerned with individuals' sense of well-being and failing to incorporate a broader relationship to social justice; thus, incorporation of spirituality in social work must be critically informed. Butot (2007) suggests that critical conceptions of spirituality can have revitalizing and sustainable impacts on our work and can bring about "radical societal change grounded in a loving stance toward others, especially those considered 'other' from ourselves" (p. 144). Baskin (2016) explains that disciplines such as social work have often defined spirituality as "encompassing an individual's values, relationships with others, and a perception of the sacred" (p. 51). However, Baskin (2016) adds that spirituality cannot be seen only as an inward journey but also as an outward responsibility to create a better world. Baskin (2016) uses the phrase "a spirituality of resistance" to link individual and community spirituality to social justice, and she writes, "It brings into focus an action-oriented take on spirituality" (p. 55). Baskin (2016) continues, "This helps me understand that my spirituality is not meant to simply make me feel better in times of distress. Rather, it is what pushes me forward in understanding, resisting, and taking action toward social justice for all of humanity" (p. 55).

In reviewing the literature on spirituality, social work, and social justice, I was encouraged to discover that I am not alone in my desire for more space within social work education to explore how spirituality is infused into my social work identity. Tisdell (2003) explains that we need to create space that invites people "into their own authenticity and increased understanding of themselves and other people" (p. 35), and to allow for creative ways to express this process of deeper understanding. Moss (2012) writes, "ways need to be found to encourage students, academics, service users and practitioners to share in, and own, the journey of discovery about spirituality and its relevance to praxis" (p. 598).

It is my invitation to classroom facilitators and to those in the workplace to defy the cultural norm of treating spirituality as taboo and to build a trusting environment where topics of personal spirituality and social work identity can be discussed directly and explored more openly. I do not have a formula for how this should occur, but perhaps one can begin with a recognition that there are likely people in your classroom or at your workplace who are longing to discuss the relevance of spirituality within their practice but feel that it is inappropriate to do so due to Western cultural norms. While striving to avoid the appropriation of spiritual practices, seek to find creative ways to incorporate meaningful discussions of spirituality into the academic and work environment. While it may not be everyone's "cup of tea," for some it can be an extremely invigorating and a liberating opportunity.

Conclusion

Through my journey of exploring what it is that motivates my pursuit for social justice, I have come to realize that beyond the biological and chemical constructs of my identity are values and beliefs that I hold which drive me to participate in the creation of an economically, politically, and socially just world. For me, this pursuit is spiritual in nature. No scientific justification can help me to fully explain it, yet I know the passion and the pursuit are real.

While social work claims to be a profession based on ideals of equality and social justice (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2005), these concepts can lose their meaning when they become distanced from the why behind our pursuit for such a reality. Exploring the *why* behind our motives and the meanings they have in our personal and professional lives can bring strength when fighting in the trenches for political, economic, social, and environmental justice and can reconnect social workers to the forces that perhaps led them to the profession to begin with.

For me, remembering the motivating giggles and tears that I have shared with others from my childhood bedroom and into my adult life has been important. However, reconnecting with how those moments transformed me, fused deep connections, and helped me to understand a reality far greater than myself has been critical. It is in this sacred reality that I have found, and that I am continuing to find, the heart of my social work identity—my heart for social justice.

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Autumn Divas: Reflections of Two Women of Color Who Achieved Doctorates after Age 50

Dana Burdnell Wilson, Linda Darrell, and Dasha Rhodes

Abstract: This article shares the personal narratives of two of its authors who refer to themselves as Autumn Divas—women of color who achieved doctorate degrees after the age of 50. These narratives reveal the women's motivation for returning to pursue a doctorate after significant professional and life experiences, the challenges they faced while doing so, the support they received, and how they plan to use their new voices to influence positive change. Recommendations for future research seek to inspire women to pursue their goals regardless of their life stage.

Keywords: women's empowerment, women doctoral studies, mature women of color

Phenomenal women of a certain age have been known to set goals for themselves that some consider to be overly ambitious and even unrealistic. The pursuit of a doctorate degree requires determination, energy, commitment, sacrifice, flexibility, and faith. For women of color, this journey is noteworthy because of their willingness to take on academic challenges and tests of fortitude at a time when some of their peers are retiring, looking forward to fewer demands on their time, and longing to leave an environment that has been difficult and, at times, oppressive. It is also remarkable in that it establishes a new path after significant life experiences, a self-motivated journey toward a new voice, and new means of building on the strengths of their communities.

This article employs a qualitative case study method, which Fries-Britt and Kelly (2005) state represents a holistic approach to examining a phenomenon. The personal narratives of two of the authors will be used to explore the motivation and challenges experienced, the support received, and plans for using their voices to influence change. As Baxter and Jack (2008) suggest, we hope to inform both clinical- and policy-oriented helping systems as well as higher education programs and to answer some of the "how" and "why" questions within relevant contexts (Yin, 2003).

In order to offer context for the population, the following information provides a depiction of the proportion of doctoral recipients who are women of color. The National Science Foundation (2016) reports that the number of doctorates conferred in 2015 was 55,006, and of that total, 25,403—or 46% of the recipients—were women, approximately 16% of whom were women of color. In terms of age distribution, 10.2% of the women receiving doctorates were in the over-45 age group. Of the women in the over-45 age group, 9.8% were Latino, 22.3% were Black or African American, 26.4% were American Indian, and 7.8% identified as more than one race. It is interesting to note that over 66% of women doctoral recipients in the over-45 age group are women of color when they comprise a very small percentage (3%) of doctoral recipients overall.

The literature suggests that women, regardless of their age groups, often carry child care and other family and domestic responsibilities that serve as barriers to their commitment to scholarly pursuits (Castro, Garcia, Cavazos, & Castro, 2011; Francois, 2014; Onwuegbuzie, Rosli, Ingram,

& Frels, 2014). Moreover, African Americans were more likely to succeed in doctoral programs when they had family support (McCallum, 2016). For African Americans, McCallum (2016) describes educational achievement as an opportunity to be a role model and acknowledge those who paved the way.

Personal Narratives

We decided that our personal narratives would reflect our inspiration, our motivation, the support received, the challenges experienced, and what our message would be to other Autumn Divas who may choose to embark on a similar journey. We have also met several women whom we have identified as Autumn Divas since we started this article. We hope they will find a sense of affirmation of their own journeys of rediscovery and generativity through the specific areas we have chosen to focus on.

Why Did We Decide to Pursue a Doctorate at This Time in Our Lives?

Dana

For quite some time—at least 20 years—I have had the goal of teaching full-time at the end of my career. I believed that I had attained valuable knowledge over the course of my professional life, and I wanted to use that knowledge to enhance the education of social work students. I had experience in direct services as an individual, family, and group counselor, as a supervisor and administrator in public social services, and as a national program director, regional director, and vice president of a national child advocacy organization. I believed that this background would provide an enriched and inspiring ability to teach social work students within the context of real organizational environments.

My journey into teaching began as an adjunct professor teaching a night class on child welfare to Bachelor of Social Work students. In this role, I found that I was able to provide examples from my own experiences of most any situation or challenge covered in the textbook or theories we studied in class. I served as a field supervisor for a dozen or more social work students at the bachelor's and master's levels in my full-time job; but again, that only began to address my interests in becoming an educator. Finally, in 2005 I made the decision to not pursue a doctorate. Although I wanted the experience of being a full-time, tenure-track professor, which required a doctorate, I believed that after working 30 years, it was too late for me.

I found myself in a senior-level position professionally, with challenging and stimulating responsibilities and great professional relationships, but I still sought something more. I was barely able to explore what that meant when I received the disturbing news that I had breast cancer. I had to step back from my 12-hour workdays and focus on my recovery. I had to go through an intensive treatment of surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation therapy. I was fortunate to have a very loving and supportive family who helped me immensely. I had my faith, excellent medical care, good insurance, and, ultimately, a good prognosis. What I didn't have was all of my brain power. I pushed forward to meet all of my responsibilities but did so with a foggy viewpoint and bewildering confusion. It turns out that while there is an increasing survival rate

in breast cancer patients with systemic chemotherapy, there are sometimes losses in cognitive functioning, which is termed "chemobrain" (Inagaki et al., 2006). I asked my oncologist about this fogginess, and he told me about chemobrain and reassured me that it was temporary, but he was not able to give me an idea of how long it would last. He said it was different for everyone. I knew that I had trouble concentrating, and I was more worried about that than other aspects of my recovery. I took the summer off, rested, swam, grumbled about the limits of unemployment insurance, spent time on my hobby of art jewelry, and worried. Eventually, the fog lifted, and I embraced with clarity the value of my intellectual abilities and knew that I would never take that for granted.

I accepted a position at a school of social work in an urban university on the East Coast as director of student affairs and admissions. I was an administrator with the opportunity to interact with prospective students and current students and participate on the leadership council for the school of social work. Perhaps it was fortuitous that I was encouraged by the dean of the school to sit in on a PhD dissertation defense, and this is where my interest in earning a doctorate was sparked once again. The idea of engaging in new research and adding to the body of knowledge used in class was enticing. I also wanted to put my brain to good use.

Reflecting on my experience in social work, I felt that although I made a valuable contribution, most of my time in the field was a blur of rushing from one project to the next. I believed that moving into academia would provide the opportunity to take the time to think and reflect on better approaches to providing services to people as well as advocating for positive change in legislation, policy, and program development. The idea of pursuing a doctorate was also enhanced by the information that, as an employee of the university, I was eligible for tuition remission. I talked with the chair of our PhD department, and she encouraged me and even stated that she thought I would be able to handle a full-time course schedule. Most of our PhD students worked full-time as I did. After talking with a few members of the faculty, one of whom was also pursuing her doctorate at a mature age, I decided to take the leap and apply for admission. On my next oncologist visit, when the doctor explained to his intern that I had re-invented myself, I knew that I was on my way.

Linda

My desire to teach began very early in my life. I knew I wanted to teach when I was playing with dolls, lining them up classroom-style and reading to them, asking them questions, and determining who was doing well and who might need help. My examples of educators came from two family members who were teachers, both of whom I admired. However, when asked by family members and friends of my parents what grade I wanted to teach, I was clear it would not be elementary, junior high, or high school. I wanted to teach at a college. Interestingly, my career choice was not education but social work. My entire academic career was focused on social work, so I began to believe becoming an educator was not really in my future. While pursuing my master's degree, I had an instructor who asked me if I had given any thought to pursuing a doctorate degree. Once again, the educator's spark was lit. However, the delay in pursuing the doctorate degree can be attributed to life events. I was completing my Master of Social Work degree and felt there was no real financial support for me to further my education,

and although I was blessed to not have the burdens of loans after graduate school, I felt returning to work was what I needed to do. I had to work to live. At the time of my graduate school graduation, I had no examples of African American PhDs before me which could have motivated me to move forward.

My career as a social worker took me into a larger medical and mental health arena, where I have worked for over 24 years. I have had the opportunity to practice in community-based mental health centers, in a large mental health hospital, in tertiary care facilities, and in private practice. I have experienced working with liver and kidney transplant patients and trained as a palliative and end-of-life care specialist. I participated on a hospital-wide ethics board for several years and helped to develop a pre- and post-transplant support organization. I have trained medical clerical staff, supervised social work students, and served as a clinical interventionist on major research studies under the guidance of a world-renowned epidemiologist. All of these experiences served to keep the desire to move into the educator's realm alive. I knew I had a great deal to offer students interested in the profession of social work; however, I was unsure of how to move in that direction. The dream remained alive and was closer to becoming more real than I knew.

The opportunity to teach a course at Morgan State University as an adjunct instructor presented itself, and I gladly accepted it. It was not only invigorating; it became the bellows which caused the embers to truly ignite the teaching dream. It was almost magical as I helped students make connections between theory and practice come alive in the classroom from my years of clinical experience. During a brief discussion with the dean about qualifications for teaching at the university, I learned that I would need to acquire a PhD. Reflecting on my conversation with the professor who suggested I pursue a doctorate, I realized that I was now 13 years older and a homeowner with a responsible demanding job and community commitments. Hmm, what should I do?

I believe nothing happens by coincidence, and I was about to read a book given to the members of our entire church by our pastor entitled *The Dream Giver*, authored by Bruce Wilkerson. It is a parable about pursuing and achieving one's dreams in the face of all obstacles: obstacles which include your own fears and self-doubts and obstacles which could help you to develop the tenacity and perseverance to achieve your dreams. I realized that if I was going to achieve the dream placed in my soul so many years ago, it was now or never.

A few years earlier I attended a university to complete a post-graduate certificate in end-of-life care, and I knew if I had the opportunity to pursue my doctoral studies, that was where I would want to go. While on that beautiful campus I experienced a spiritual moment which opened my heart and mind for the next steps in my life. In 2006, off I went to attend the doctoral program's open house. I did not inform anyone because I did not want to be talked out of this before I fully knew what "this" was. When I returned home, I completed the application, submitted it, and waited. Within three weeks I received a letter accepting me into the program for the upcoming academic year. I was elated, energized, and scared. Here was the moment I hoped for, dreamed about, and anticipated. I was returning to school to pursue a PhD at the ripe young age of 56. I had no precedent for this experience, no example, and no mentor—just my dream and my faith.

What Was Our Experience Informing Family and Friends, and What Was Their Response?

Dana

I talked with a close girlfriend about my plans and was surprised when she reminded me that I had always wanted to do this. She told me that I first mentioned this plan to her 30 years beforehand. This was my friend with whom I shared both personal and professional views and goals. We worked together off and on, we got married a year apart, we had children at the same time, we shared the challenge of caring for aging parents, and we both entered the phase of parenthood with adult children, yet I was surprised that I had told her about this dream so long ago. She encouraged me without hesitation, saying that our desires are even more important as we age. I was reluctant to mention it to my husband at first because I already had a master's degree and he had expressed an interest in pursuing one (in my mind it was his turn). It seems that I was projecting my priorities onto him; however, I was the one ready to be a student again. He cheered me on and pledged his support for the endeavor, but neither of us really had an understanding of what it would entail. Later, after witnessing me spend untold hours at my computer, he joked to our friends that he would "just slide a piece of chicken under the door every once in a while" and leave me alone. My children, who were adults (in fact, my daughter was in graduate school while working full-time), received the news positively as well. My daughter and I would trade war stories about sources and citations, and my son would make sure that I took time to eat and sleep, reminding me that I am still a cancer survivor needing fuel and rest.

My most intimate friends and family (including many teachers on both my side of the family and my husband's and friends who had witnessed me take the past 10 years to complete an art jewelry certificate) celebrated the benefits of being a lifetime learner. Another close friend and I decided to go back to school to prepare for a new journey before we retired. We wrote recommendation letters for each other and encouraged each other to proceed. However, for those who I casually knew or worked with, the news was met first with stunned silence and then, "What? Why in the world would you do that? Are you crazy? You should be thinking about retirement!" These reactions were not helped by the fact that I would not be available for many social events and wouldn't have more than a few minutes for conversation. There was little sympathy for my plight of having so many assignments and needing to study—to them, those were young people's challenges.

Some of my colleagues at work were incredulous that I would pursue my PhD in social work at the school where I was working full-time. They thought that it would make more sense to go to another school or department so that I wouldn't have to interact with the same people while "wearing a different hat." I learned to do this with some difficulty, as some of my colleagues advised me that my plan wouldn't end well. I had to learn to compartmentalize and approach the same faculty members as colleagues by day and as my professors by night. I made sure that I approached each class as a student rather than as a "seasoned" professional, and I put forward the clear message that I was there to learn. I offered my perspectives in class, as we all did, but did not by any means know all there was to know about the topic at hand. In fact, I talked about

how good it was to learn about the new research as I had been in graduate school decades ago. I was also constantly aware that I was in a fishbowl, feeling that I could not allow myself to fail because everyone was watching.

I must make the important point that I was in a historically black college/university (HBCU), and the environment of nurturing and supporting students permeated all levels, including the PhD program. HBCUs generally include a commitment to support and empower diverse students and an obligation to uplift the community in their mission and vision statements. The culture of the campus often includes a priority to build the students' social and ethical training and experience as well as their academic advancement. This made a significant difference for me. Even though I was an experienced professional, the pursuit of a doctorate encompasses enough emotional highs and lows, time-related crises, unpacking of previously-held notions of expertise, and the need to let go of trying to control every aspect of the learning process (or your life); therefore, the support offered by the faculty for an African American woman seeking a PhD was welcomed and very much needed.

Linda

Upon my return from the university's open house, I contacted my mother and informed her. I shared my dream with her, and her response was to ask what was stopping me. She knew what I desired to do, and she was all in. My father, on the other hand, wanted to know if I had thought it through, what it would mean for me financially, and how I would manage work, the demands of school at this level, and keeping my head above water. In what was a false sense of self-assurance, I told him that it would all work out. Here I was, a fully-grown woman, and I was explaining to my father how I would manage my life as a doctoral student! In all honesty, I did not know how I would manage, but my faith kicked in, and I believed that if this was meant to be, God was going to provide what I needed every step of the way.

I completed the application process and submitted it a week late. There was still a part of me that wanted the assurance that this was what I was supposed to do. I received a reply in record time, accepting and welcoming me as a doctoral student in the School of Social Work Class of 2007. I was elated!

Now I had to inform my director at the hospital and my supervisor. The director was happy for me, concerned about coverage, and seemingly supportive of my decision and opportunity. My supervisor was sarcastic and not very amenable to the idea, suggesting that perhaps I was experiencing a mid-life crisis and should do like she did and just purchase a vacation condo and chill. My response, equally sarcastic, was that I already had one, and so I decided my decision was now final.

Friends and colleagues were excited for me. They actually planned a surprise party for me and brought me gifts to fashion my dorm room. I was prepared to enter a new and exciting next phase of my life, and I was excitedly petrified.

What Were the Challenges and Barriers, and How Were They Managed?

Dana

The idea of returning to school after so many years was a challenge in itself. I graduated with my Master of Social Work degree in 1978—34 years before starting the PhD program. I was not sure of my ability to focus for the sustained amount of time required for such advanced study. This notion was complicated by the fact that I was a recent breast cancer survivor. It had only been one year since I had completed my treatments. Chemotherapy had taken a devastating toll on me, and I was just regaining my strength and my perspective. I am generally an optimist, but this situation had shaken me to the core. I was back to working full-time, but I was in a relatively new position and new environment, and I was worried about my stamina on the one hand and whether I would be taken seriously on the other hand. I was also concerned that I would not be seen favorably in comparison with much younger applicants. Additionally, since I was involved in graduate admissions, I was aware of a level of skepticism by some faculty members as to why older applicants sought PhDs. Did they just want the initials behind their names? What would they do with it? An invitation to attend a dissertation defense was the impetus that I needed. It was powerful to witness an emerging scholar committed to a topic and expanding his horizons as a researcher and educator. My connection to the PhD candidate was not his dissertation per se, as the topic was very different from my area of interest. What impressed me was the fact that he embraced the process and was able to fully explain the importance of his research to the profession and to the community, how the research was conducted, what theories the research was based on, what the findings were, and what implications they had for the future. As someone who envisioned myself as a professor, this was an aha moment for me. When I connected the degree to a person, rather than just seeing a lofty goal, it made it seem more attainable and it instilled a belief that I could do it too.

Once my journey began as a full-time PhD student, I had what I considered to be normal challenges: handling full-time work responsibilities along with the reading and writing assignments, comprehending and applying statistical analysis techniques, taking comprehensive exams, and navigating other school-related trials. The sheer volume of work was overwhelming. I thought I understood that initially, but there is nothing like living the experience. It seems that there are no "normal challenges." Everyone has unique life experiences, and their relationship with their journey to achieve a doctorate is distinctive.

I told myself that I had an advantage due to having adult children, and I believe that to be true, but the flip side is that I was more prone to fatigue and less likely to be able to stay up late and produce coherent products. Moreover, I was far less able to remember theories and concepts from my Master of Social Work program than my colleagues who had only three to five years since their master's studies, and my sources were ancient in academic time frames.

A major factor that helped in managing the challenges was the connection with my cohort. The chairperson of the PhD program explained that we were not in competition with each other, and we were encouraged to work together. There were six of us who started the program together, and we became more than an assembly of fellow students. Instead, we formed a group that supported each other in pursuing a common goal. This mutual support system turned out to be

invaluable not only in the completion of challenging assignments successfully but in facing personal and professional barriers and working to overcome them in order to remain in the program and achieve our ultimate goals. Although we had a sizable age range, we were African American PhD students, all of whom had significant professional experience. Our areas of expertise were diverse, and we were able to help each other with the various clinical and policy perspectives on the subject matter we were studying, and the group had the opportunity to take advantage of the knowledge of its individual members. When one of us experienced times of frustration and uncertainty, the others would respond with a listening ear, providing understanding and encouragement to move forward. We formed a study group to prepare for the comprehensive exams, and we critiqued each other as we prepared for our proposal defenses. In the end, we all graduated within a year of one another and celebrated accomplishments together.

Linda

Here I was, a 56-year-old in school—not just any school but one of the premier "Seven Sisters Ivy League Universities." Oh my! My mind was racing. I made requests of friends to water my plants, care for my two Siamese cats, and take in my mail. I was off on a life-changing journey. Attending a predominately white institution (PWI) was not unusual for me. I had attended PWIs my entire academic career: one of the state universities in New York as an undergraduate and a large urban university in Virginia as a graduate student. The difference was that I had not lived on campus; I always had my own residence, and I did not have to share my space. I was going to meet the cohort I would take this journey with, and I was anxious. My good friend at the time drove to New England with me. The car was packed like an undergrad going off to college for the first time. I was headed to a place I had visited only once before to spend eight weeks in residence with a group of strangers. What had I gotten myself into? The questions rolling around in my head were numerous and my nerves were on edge. I could not get there fast enough. This was a seven-hour drive. The day was beautiful and the scenery heading to the New England states was breathtaking. We talked, but I do not recall our conversations. I was focused on getting there and meeting with my cohort. Once we arrived in town, we checked into the hotel and I headed to the campus.

The university had one of the most idyllic campuses I had ever seen, so I was excited to do this program for eight weeks in the summer—June to August with one break in July. I arrived on campus, picked up my registration and housing materials, reviewed the agenda for the weekend, and located the residence where the doctoral students would stay. Our cohort met later that day for brunch at the home of one of the co-directors of the doctoral program. This was exciting yet scary. I felt like the main character in the parable presented in *The Dream Giver* (Wilkerson, 2003). Ordinary was his name and he left the land of familiar to enter into the unknown, with only the direction of the Dream Giver (Wilkerson, 2003). My spiritual ears were tuned, and I observed everything and everyone around me for signs of anything that smacked of racism, ageism, or any negative energy. Much to my surprise and relief, I did not encounter any of that. So, I was off on my adventure, becoming a student again, getting my head into the process, and securing my space. Space is very important to me. It supports and comforts me, and during this journey it was important that my space held me safely like a nest, allowing me to focus and produce during the next 2 ½ years that I had committed to this process.

The day my cohort met was clear, warm, and beautiful. The co-director's home was situated on a beautiful piece of private property not far from the campus. This was a cycling and walking community with plenty of opportunity for exercise and fresh air. There would be eight of us: one white male, four white females, two African American females, and one Asian female. One white female was close to my age and was from Long Island, New York; she was very clear to state that she lived in the Hamptons and had a private practice in Manhattan. The other African American was much younger than me and was a vegan. I participated in the icebreakers and engaged in small talk with everyone, but in my mind I was creating my own space and considering with whom to align. We were encouraged to create bonds, study together, and become a cohesive group. I did not really see that coming off quite that way. We eventually called ourselves the UDUM (Undifferentiated United Mass). This worked for about two weeks, and pairings began to form. The one male member of our cohort lived off campus in a private residence he rented for the summer. Many times he was absent from our groups but was a wonderful individual.

My best connection was with an Asian woman. She and I would meet for late-night coffee, have discussions about lectures, and attend evening seminars together. She was extremely bright and was immersed in clinical information. She helped me to understand Freud and the other classical theorists, and she was great company. She had a long-term female partner. They were both from Canada and had very active private practices.

My room, the awesome library, and the magnificent botanical gardens became my safe spaces, my study spaces, and my nurturing places. There were frequent phone calls to my mother and friends. I missed my cats tremendously, and my plants at home concerned me. But I pressed into this process and moved through it with as much grace as I could muster, not caring much about my appearance; I was entrenched in my studies and the real reason I was there, which was to obtain a PhD and teach at the university.

During this process, my parents encountered illness and my friendship with someone special in my life dissipated and died. My parents would die before I completed my dissertation, and my life would not be the same.

What Is Your Message to Your Sisters Following You?

Dana

No one can predict the best time for you to retire or seek a less-demanding work life. This is something that comes from inside of you. When you reach a certain age, you know yourself, and you are less inclined to allow others to tell you what you should think or feel. I believe this applies not only to your values and convictions but also to your plans for yourself in life. Our lives are not over. We may have many fruitful and productive years ahead of us or we may not, but for the time that we are here, it is important for us to continue to dream, to aspire, to achieve, and to do what is enriching and fulfilling for ourselves. If achieving a doctorate is something that you are thinking about, dreaming about, yearning to do, then by all means do it! *You* have something valuable to offer to the world, and this may be the means to get you there. You

determine what you can and cannot do; if you are mentally and spiritually ready, then you can handle any challenges that get in the way.

I have a colleague and mentor who said that my doctorate would give me wings. This credential will allow you to fly and to achieve whatever you see ahead of you. African American women receive 5.6% of all doctorate degrees (Dortch, 2015). Why not make that percentage higher? We have much to contribute.

Linda

Obtaining an education is something you will never regret. Follow your heart, listen to your spirit, and move with their leading. Fear of the unknown is the only thing which will hold you back. Fear is dangerous—it will steal your future, diminish your present, and leave you wondering, "What if?" Age is truly what you make it. Scripture tells us we can bear fruit even in our old age (Psalm 91:14, New International Version). The more fruit you bear, the more you have to share with others. Achieving a doctorate is not the end to your learning process; it can be the beginning of helping others to press forward into their destinies. I do not regret any sacrifice I had to make to arrive at this point in my career. More importantly, I know that even though my parents did not make it to witness this moment, they were always encouraging me to do my best and to help others to achieve their best.

How Will Our New Voices Influence Change?

Dana

I have used my new voice as I had hoped—to contribute to the education of the social workers of tomorrow. I try to influence my students to be aware and make it a practice to stay aware of social policy legislation and regulation and proposed national, state, and local policy, and to consider them in relation to social justice goals. As private citizens, as direct service professionals, and as advocates, they have an important opportunity and responsibility to work toward positive change and the end of oppressive and discriminatory practices.

In addition to teaching, I am able to use my scholarship platform to produce articles and chapters that would not have been considered for publication without my doctorate. I am an editor of a new scholarly journal which is shining a light on urban issues and urban social work; giving voice to contemporary challenges and methods of addressing them; calling for advances in social work education, research, and community partnerships; and calling for the enhancement of social work practice toward improving the quality of life for urban populations. I have also been able to co-lead an urban women's leadership development program for African American women Master of Social Work students. We have been able to provide these young women with opportunities and exposure that will be beneficial on both a professional and a personal level, including opportunities to participate in workshop presentations, volunteer at conferences, engage in community self-help efforts, and apply for fellowships as a result of their experiences. I would not have been eligible to be a leader in this effort in the academy without my doctorate.

I hope to encourage more women to pursue their goals of educational attainment and not be thwarted by the mere fact of their age, whatever it may be. In many cultures, including African American culture, our elders are respected as sages with knowledge and experience to impart. Let us step up and embrace this path for ourselves.

Linda

This academic platform has provided the opportunity to assist up-and-coming social work students and professionals to be the best they can be. I never miss a moment to share practice experience and to encourage students to stretch beyond what they think they can do. I have become productive in my scholarship, publishing at least 10 articles in the last academic year. I am now awaiting a tenure and promotion decision and looking forward to working with a colleague at another university on a project addressing grief, homicide, and spirituality.

I am a co-editor on a special edition journal addressing race and reconciliation published by the National Association of Christians in Social Work. I have the opportunity to combine my spirituality and clinical practice together in the work I do in the class and in academia. I have the privilege of advising Master of Social Work students on their academic pursuits and in life decisions. The professional platform which this degree has afforded me continues to invigorate and excite me. I hope to continue this work for a long time and, more importantly, to help other women of a certain age to realize their dreams.

Discussion and Recommendations

Hutchinson (2013) cites Erikson in stating the psychosocial struggle of middle adulthood is generativity versus stagnation. According to Hutchinson (2013), generativity is the ability to transcend personal interests to provide care and concern for younger and older generations. Hutchinson (2013) further cites Erikson in stating generativity encompasses "procreation, productivity, and creativity, and thus the generation of new beings, as well as of new products and new ideas, including a kind of self-generation concerned with further identity development" (p. 123).

According to Hutchinson (2013), Erikson saw generativity as an instinct that works to perpetuate society. The experience we embarked upon as two mid-life women highlights productivity, creativity, and procreation along with a desire to perpetuate society. We were also furthering self-identity development as we moved further into new careers and life experiences.

Reflecting on our two narratives, it is evident that there are a few perspectives and topics in common: We both were realizing long-held aspirations by pursuing our doctorates; we both believed that we had an enhanced ability to help students connect theory and practice; our support systems seemed to have been significant in achieving mutual goals; and we both encouraged others in this age group to pursue their dreams. The achievement of a doctorate at whatever age enables women to continue to work toward the advancement of human rights and address the disparities that urban and communities of color face (Bent-Goodley, 2016). This activity, therefore, seems to support the pursuit of a doctorate in the autumn years, not only as a

personal goal but as a social justice goal.

Our narrative reveals implications for future research. The topic is ripe for a qualitative study of women of color who achieved their doctorates after the age of 50. What were their experiences? What were their challenges? Did they have the support and encouragement that they needed? Would they recommend this path to others? Could their stories of motivation, challenge, resilience, and success be inspirational to future generations of women of color? The fact that we are both women of color is being addressed intentionally, and future research may reveal that our social identities of race and gender are not to be considered alone (Bowleg, 2012), but the intersection of these and other identities should be analyzed in order to understand both disparities in higher education and also how women who are similarly situated may provide support and encouragement for success among each other. Littlefield (2003) emphasizes that we can be adaptive in relation to our environments, and particularly that African American women can replace images that were derived from others imposing stereotypical descriptions and replace them with authentic images of women to transcend an oppression that is psychologically based and define ourselves for ourselves (Littlefield, 2003).

We recommend that a qualitative study follow to provide broader insights as to how mature women may provide support and encouragement to each other as they pursue their unfulfilled goals in a number of different areas. It is our hope that this strengths-based focus will help other mature women look beyond the barriers, focus on the very real possibilities that are before them, and understand that while their journey may not be easy, they can trust in themselves and their support systems and acknowledge their own worthiness and entitlement to pursue their dreams.

In her signature poem, "Still, I Rise," Maya Angelou (1978) advances a positive message:

> Just like moons and like suns,
> With the certainty of tides,
> Just like hopes springing high,
> Still I'll rise.

Autumn Divas may be regarded as living legacies with a wealth of valuable information, but more importantly we can be models for women seeking to re-invent themselves, and we can provide dynamic examples of future possibilities. As Autumn Divas we can seek to connect with others, building bridges for the benefit of the women of color in this age group who have much to give future generations and much to allow themselves to receive.

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Becoming a Teacher in Saudi Arabia: Female Role Models and Mentors

Mashael Alharbi

Abstract: This autobiographical narrative explores the way in which stories about the author's early life informed her experiences as a teacher and a researcher. Having always thought that becoming a teacher was about pursuing a personal project, she discovered that it also involved and impacted other people along the way.

Keywords: mentor, Saudi Arabia, role model, narrative, teaching and learning, autobiography

The idea of narrative as life story includes the notion of teaching and learning beyond formal schooling (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). In Saudi Arabia, girls' lives outside of school have been particularly influenced by male family members, such as fathers, brothers, and husbands (Abalkhail & Allan, 2015). Abalkhail and Allan (2015) showed in their study that most of the women who participated from Saudi Arabia indicated that men in their family impacted their future success. However, in my life experiences, women—including my mother and my teachers—have had a huge impact on my career choice to become a teacher and on my choice to enter a PhD program in curriculum studies. Having women mentors helped in different ways, such as reducing isolation and navigating the complexity of a professional environment, especially in the context of Saudi Arabia, where women mostly study and work in separate sections from men (Alharbi & Renwick, 2017; Alvarez & Lazzari, 2016). By applying relational cultural theory (RCT), Alvarez and Lazzari (2016) examined the importance of improving the mentoring relationship among women who share personal and professional lives in the same context. The RCT theory focuses on human development in connection with others who share the same beliefs and advantages of the relationship (Alvarez & Lazzari, 2016). By employing RCT to my life experiences, I have connected with other women in Saudi Arabia—both in and outside of school—who have and continue to support my professional and educational future.

Educational experiences occur in school and outside of school (Brinia, 2015; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Schaafsma & Vinz, 2011), where mentoring female students plays a key role in their future life in the context of Saudi Arabia. Based on this view, Connelly and Clandinin (1988) define the education process as "a narrative of experience that grows and strengthens a person's capabilities to cope with life" (p. 27). One of the important tools in a narrative reflection of an individual's knowledge and practices is an autobiography. According to Connelly and Clandinin (1988), "autobiography is the telling of our own history" (p. 37), and it is a useful tool for reflection, thinking back, and understanding yourself. In this manuscript, I construct a retrospective narrative from fragments of my autobiography, focusing on how I became a teacher. I use fictitious names to preserve the anonymity of the important role models and mentors who so strongly influenced me.

Growing up as a girl in Saudi Arabia with only two career options, which included nursing and teaching, provided very limited variety for making a choice. Being a teacher always seemed culturally ideal, as it does not involve any men. Saudi Arabian working environments are always separated between women and men, especially in schools where education systems divide men

and women. Boys study in schools where male teachers teach them, and girls study in schools where only female teachers and administrators are allowed (Smith & Abouammoh, 2013). For most families, being a teacher is the desired career for girls. Having grown up in a family where I was often encouraged and facilitated to nurture my dream, I spent most of my childhood role-playing a teacher with other kids, hoping that one day I would become a teacher. I am the first-born child in a family of five children, and my mother, being a teacher herself, was the first teacher I had in my life. She was the first inspiration for me to become a teacher. Her impact on me has been enduring, and the lessons that she taught me continue to powerfully influence my current life as a mother and a teacher. Within the Saudi Arabian culture, to which I belong, women are responsible for all household chores, including looking after the kids, which is something I find to be too much for women alone. As the oldest daughter, my mother often relied on me to help her with housework and with teaching my siblings. She confided in me a lot, and I wanted to do anything I could to help. Often I took it upon myself to take charge of my younger brother and sisters.

Story Fragment One: Colors and Worksheets

I was in 5th grade, and my favorite subject was art. My art teacher's way of teaching, self-presentation, and approach to students inspired most girls in my class who wanted to become teachers. It was generally known based on the curriculum categorization in Saudi Arabia that girls could take up only one of the two prescribed careers, either nursing or teaching. My art teacher was Mrs. Jameela. She was tall and elegant, and she had a model-like poise and a warm and caring heart. Also, she was open-minded and did not restrict us when we wanted to ask questions in class. She instilled in us a sense of self-worth, and she often encouraged us to work independently, particularly when we returned home at the end of each day. That year, the paintings I made of my school, a flower, and a 5th-grade girl were most outstanding. I think it was in Mrs. Jameela's class that I learned drawing, shading, and painting, which I continued to practice at home every evening when I returned from school. When I told Mrs. Jameela that I had my own painting stand at home in my room and that I could teach my brothers and sisters, she gave me some paints, colors, and worksheets from the art room at my school for me to teach at home.

My experience in elementary school was full of happiness, and I had perfect moments. My school was an all-girls school, and all my teachers were women, including the school's principal, workers in the administration, cafeteria workers, and cleaners. Thus, the norm in Saudi Arabian schools is that boys attend different schools in different buildings and girls have their own schools. I remember most of the teachers that I had in elementary school, and I had positive memories about them, but Mrs. Jameela was one of the most memorable teachers. Growing up as a girl in Saudi Arabia, I wore a school-green uniform, and other girls did too. Most of our teachers were mothers, and I think they looked at us as their children, as did Mrs. Jameela.

Nine years later I was a university student studying for a Bachelor of Education degree in Saudi Arabia. My sister, who was nine years old at that time, wanted me to go with her to her teacher because she had lost her book and was afraid to go to school that day. The next morning, I went with her. My sister introduced me to her teacher, and she was Mrs. Jameela, who I knew very

well. Mrs. Jameela said to my sister, "I know your older sister; she was one of my best students when she was in grade five." She looked at my sister and said, "You too are a good student, and I know you lost your book because you left it in the classroom last weekend, and I kept it for you until you were able to collect it." I could not believe that Mrs. Jameela still remembered I was a student in her class. I felt happy and proud of myself—especially in front of my young sister—that one of my elementary teachers had an encouraging memory about me. I was relieved when I found that my sister did not lose her book and Mrs. Jameela had kept it in her locker. I was thinking of Mrs. Jameela as a teacher, how she looked after her students even after they left the class to make sure she collected their belongings for them when they came back the next school day. What Mrs. Jameela did was not typical work for teachers to do; I remembered most teachers left the class before students, especially at the end of the day.

Six years later my family moved to a new house, and a neighbor invited my family to their son's wedding party. I went with my mother. At the party, I saw a very familiar face—Mrs. Jameela! She was living in the same neighborhood. She had also been the 5th-grade teacher of the bride. She was delighted to see me, and I was amazed that she still remembered me. Not only that, but she also asked me about my sister. When she was asked to deliver a short speech, she talked well of her former students and mentioned me in particular. At that time, I graduated from the university, and I applied for a teaching position in public school, but there were few jobs available, so I decided to teach adult workshops about strategies for a successful job interview and developing Microsoft Office skills.

I hope that in my own teaching career I have had a sharp memory of my students and the ability to give my students their worth and affirmation like Mrs. Jameela gave me. Although now much older, she had a good memory of her former students, affirmed them, and made them feel their self-worth. She strongly believed that students drew upon their cultural background and that they brought with them their own knowledge to class. They were endowed with intelligence from which they drew their experiences and histories and progressed in learning at different rates. She took the time to get to know us and to understand each one's strengths, and she always remembered us whenever and wherever she met us. She had pride in her former students, particularly those who were brilliant. She made us feel important and gave us the courage to believe that we could succeed. And, she encouraged us to work toward achieving our dreams.

Story Fragment Two: Teaching New Technology

My mother always wanted me to gain new knowledge and skills, so when I was 16 years old she registered me in a perfect computer institution in Saudi Arabia, which was run by a private organization. She bought me a personal computer so I could practice whenever I wanted. I remembered everyone in my family and my friends came to see it. My mother encouraged me to teach my friends the computer skills I had acquired. I was pleased and excited that I could teach people new skills that I had just learned. I got a summer job at a nongovernmental women's community center in my neighborhood in Saudi Arabia. The center offered different classes about a variety of topics, such as textile and sewing, painting, English language, computer skills, and cooking for women and girls. At that time the computer was new technology, and very few people had the skills to use it, so it was an excellent opportunity for me to teach there because

there was a demand for teachers in that subject area. At the community center, there were some adults in the summer computer class that I taught. I became passionate about sharing my knowledge and newly acquired skills. I soon realized that in order for them to learn well, I needed patience, as I had to repeat the steps over and over again before they could master how to open the computer and start typing in Microsoft Word. I was soon talking to my mother about the friends I taught as my students. My students were excited to learn and visit me more often. Sometimes, I let them try some group computer games as another technique of learning computer skills.

Remembering this experience at the community center brought back memories about the last year of my teacher education program in the 10th grade. As part of completing my degree, I had to do a practicum. Amani, one of my 10th-grade students, was always bothering her friends in class. Her talking distracted them all the time as I taught home economics class. I asked other teachers if they had a similar experience, and they all told me she was doing the same in their classes and that she was quite distractive. I became attentive to her in order to help her concentrate and to allow others to learn. Whenever we had a cooking class in the kitchen, I made Amani my assistant because she had told me that cooking was her favorite subject. I also arranged some group activities during the cooking class, which always made Amani fully engaged as she, together with me, had to constantly monitor what students were doing. Amani became a different student from what I had known her to be; she became composed and very focused.

I met Amani a few years ago at an elementary education teachers workshop at the regional education office, and that office is a branch of the ministry of education in the region. The primary responsibilities for the regional education office are supervising public and private schools in the region, monitoring both revenues and expenditures, managing the ministry of education property and facilities, providing curriculum material and school equipment, and offering different workshops on teaching and learning. She was thrilled to see me; however, I did not remember her at the beginning. She was a student at the teaching college, and she was working on her dream to become a teacher.

My experiences with teaching my friends computer skills and teaching Amani taught me the importance of creating interest and using a variety of techniques. In the computer class, I included computer games that would appeal to 10th graders. Figuring out how to create interest also influenced my teaching of home economics. It was so easy in home economics to get caught up in the experiential learning of hands-on activities. While this was of great importance, I also tried to know what it was that distracted students from concentrating and from effective learning and to tap into their potential to ensure that I could get the best out of them and they could get the best out of themselves. I have also learned that being kind, nurturing, and caring toward students is part of being a good teacher.

Story Fragment Three: Teaching Roots

During my last year of middle school, a teacher asked me if I could help one girl, who was a relative of mine, learn how to go about using her exercise book. She was given an exercise

package on different subjects, like math, Arabic grammar, reading, and writing, to take with her over the holidays. I was very proud of myself that my teacher could rely on me to help another student with her exercise books. My family allowed the girl to come to my house over the holidays so I could understand her difficulties and explain to her how to go about her prep work. She explained to me that during class she felt uncomfortable, the teachers talked fast, and she could not keep up with the class, which eventually caused her to feel frustrated. My mother bought me a whiteboard and pens to facilitate my teaching. I was delighted to do this "job."

One day in 12th grade, my teacher had a cold and could not complete the history lesson, so she asked the class if any of us could carry on for her. I was not sure if I could teach my classmates anything meaningful. The class was silent and nobody seemed to be ready to teach. I became brave and raised my hand, indicating that I wanted to try. The teacher invited me to the front. I started by asking a question to involve the rest of the class and to see how capable I would be at controlling the class. After inviting four to five students to respond, it was time to end the lesson. After the class was over, my teacher called me and said, "Hmm, I can see you have some potential for being a good teacher one day. You have the basic skills." I was excited after the feedback I got from my history teacher, and that made me more comfortable about getting positive comments.

I have found that mothers and teachers are such great role models for young people. I believe a mother is her kids' first teacher, as my mother was in my life. There is always something about a teacher that is inspiring. It may be the way the teacher talks, teaches, walks, or cares. Having role models in Mrs. Jameela and my mother, along with such opportunities as role-playing a teacher, the practicum, and helping my relative learn how to go about her prep work, nurtured my dream toward becoming a teacher. I notice that sometimes students pursue a career, but they do so with hardly any assurance that they have any potential for it. Tapping into students' possibilities and bringing that potential to their awareness can give students insights into their prospects and capabilities regarding possible careers. This goes hand-in-hand with appraisal. Besides, providing hands-on activities can also bring students' aspirations closer to real-life situations so they can fantasize and keep pursuing the goal.

Lessons Learned

I discovered that a narrative that includes an autobiographical approach helped me by looking back at my life, and I can say that my desire to become a teacher has been nurtured over time and facilitated by my family and my teachers, classmates, relatives, and other related events. There have been meaningful outcomes along the journey to achieving my dream of becoming a teacher, namely the relationships that I have had in my life with women who were role models, particularly my mother and my teachers. Currently, I am a PhD student in Canada, and I have a dream to work in any one of the women's universities in Saudi Arabia. My success thus far was achievable because I had several supports and opportunities in school and at home, all of which provided a safe environment in which my development was nurtured. Recently, Saudi Arabia has been under a reform economically and educationally, and I think women should "learn to relate to one another and treat each other as sources of knowledge" (Smith, 1987, p. 35). I hope that understanding the relevance and usefulness of developing a connection in schools,

universities, and workplaces will improve the mentoring relationship among women in Saudi Arabia.

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Reflections on Teaching Sexual Health in Social Work

Elizabeth Russell

Abstract: This article presents the personal narrative of the author, who discusses the professional and academic experiences that led to her becoming a sex therapist and teaching a sexual health course in a Master of Social Work program. It discusses how the course came into existence and why it is needed in the profession, and it provides a reflection on the course delivery over the past ten years. In addition, the personal narrative and academic experiences of the author, an assignment that challenges students' values regarding sexual health, and a framework for asking clients about their sexual health that can be adapted to almost any behavioral and mental health setting are provided.

Keywords: sexual health, mental health, teaching, sexuality

> "Talk is the key to the search for understanding sexual thoughts, sexual feelings, and sexual actions—ultimately it is the key to helping patients."
> ~William L. Maurice, 1999, *Sexual Medicine in Primary Care*

I always knew I wanted to be a social worker in the mental health field. Talking with others about who we are as individuals and collectively, gaining insights into why we behave the way we do, and understanding how this impacts our relationships appealed to me from a young age. While my parents encouraged counseling and open discussions about mental health, one topic that was not open for discussion was sex. It was made clear at an early age that sex was an act between a man and woman who were married, and it was only during that phase of one's life that it could be discussed. I received minimal sexual education in primary and secondary school. Growing up in a conservative, Irish, Catholic family and attending Catholic schools did not encourage an open dialogue about sexual desires, needs, or functioning, particularly for women. And the idea that sex is for pleasure, not just reproduction, was novel at best. It was not until I went to college that I realized not everyone was raised the same way and that talking about sex was not shameful or was not to be avoided. This realization came both from formal education in human development and family studies, and then informally from my diverse group of friends.

There were two distinct experiences in my undergraduate career that led me toward the path of studying sexual health and being a sex therapist. During my sophomore year, I had the opportunity to take an introductory human sexuality course. I sat in a lecture-based class with over 400 other students, and each week I learned about the many facets of human sexuality; the importance of sexual development, sexual functioning and dysfunction; the complexities of sexual matters in relationships; and the influence of media, culture, and history on sexual practices and beliefs. In addition to the lectures, each person was assigned to meet once a week with a discussion group led by teaching assistants (TAs) to explore our beliefs, values, and opinions about human sexuality. The first few group sessions were tense, and it became obvious that many of us—myself included—had difficulty talking about sexual matters without embarrassment, shame, or other emotions. By the end of the course, my understanding of human sexuality had increased, but more importantly, my comfort level in discussing it had increased. I was fascinated with the many complexities of human sexuality and wanted to know more.

My interest in the topic did not go unnoticed, and the next semester I was asked to be a teaching assistant to lead discussions like the ones in which I had participated. In addition to preparing course lessons, the professor provided the TAs with advanced education in sexual health across the lifespan. This additional education and knowledge, as well as the opportunities to lead discussions, fueled my interest and curiosity as to why sex, such an important aspect of life, was so taboo. From then on, I found myself reading books in my spare time on various sexual health-related topics, working in the world of sexual health and HIV education, and volunteering at various health organizations doing peer counseling and sexual health education.

The second distinct experience I had was on a much more personal level. During my junior and senior years, I lived in a cooperative on campus with approximately 25 other students. It was much like living in a dorm in that we had our own rooms (or maybe shared with one roommate), shared common areas and bathrooms, and had our own meal plan in which we took turns cooking meals for one another. Our house was known on campus for being LGB (lesbian, gay, bisexual) friendly, which in the 1990s was not always the case. Most of the residents also became friends. At one point during my time there, one of my friends was diagnosed as HIV positive. This news was heartbreaking and there was a lot of discussion about the illness, treatments, and whether or not certain people could be told for fear of their reactions. Back then, HIV was highly stigmatized and safety was a real concern. That experience personalized sexual health in a way like never before. It made me challenge my own beliefs about sexually transmissible infections, the impact of receiving a diagnosis, sexual health safety, and the many complexities of living with HIV. For several months following the diagnosis, I struggled with knowing exactly what to say to be supportive to my friend. It was then that I turned to counseling for support and found that the counselor with whom I was working did not feel comfortable with the topic and often changed the subject. The counselor's reaction mirrored the stigma and ignorance that were associated with HIV at that time, and it made me realize that just because someone was trained as a helping professional did not mean they were comfortable talking about sexual health. These experiences along with two years of HIV education and case management solidified my desire to study sexual health more formally.

In my graduate course work, I trained and worked in a sex therapy clinic at a university hospital, and upon graduation completed a year-long fellowship in sex therapy. In order to gain additional experiences in mental health treatment, I went on to work in two mental health agencies providing general counseling. In addition, I became an adjunct professor for several undergraduate courses in social work practice. During these experiences, a similar theme arose that I could not ignore. From the students I taught in the undergraduate courses who wrote about their discomfort in discussing sexual topics in their class when given an assignment about the importance of human sexuality in professional practice, to fellow graduate students who sat in classes with me who turned to me to answer questions about sexual health because they knew it was my passion instead of having to challenge their own comfort level, to the practitioners I worked with in several mental health-related agencies that simply referred cases having to do with sexual health concerns, the majority were not comfortable discussing sexuality and sexual health. I remember distinctly being told by a colleague that in her five years at the agency in which we worked, her supervisor not once asked about the sexual health concerns of clients. When my colleague finally had enough courage to bring it up to her supervisor, her questions

were quickly dismissed and she was told to focus on "more important" treatment issues. This baffled me. During my experience of being at that particular agency only six months, at least half of the clients I worked with wanted more information or had a concern about their sexual health. And within a year of working there, 95% of my caseload had a sexual concern as one of the main counseling topics.

Within a few months of employment at both of the mental health agencies in which I worked, it became quickly known that I had training in and passion for working with topics of sexual health. I did several trainings for other practitioners and supervisors on how to bring up sexual topics with clients and supervisees. In these trainings, I began asking about training in human sexuality from a knowledge perspective and from the perspective of how practitioners addressed such topics and their comfort levels with doing so. Often when I asked these questions, I received a less-than-favorable response. A few people would mention a course or two they had taken on human sexuality at some point in their college career; very few reported any additional training specific to sexual health treatment, and most suddenly found doodling in their notebook much more interesting than commenting on their training in sexual health. While this was not surprising, it was disheartening. Sexual health is woven into the tapestry of each of our lives. Not learning about it perpetuates the forbidden nature of sex and ultimately damages relationships, self-esteem, and can lead to other health and mental health concerns (Russell, 2012). It was this realization that caused me to go on to pursue my doctorate, during which time I surveyed mental health practitioners working with children and adolescents in a community mental health setting about their knowledge, attitudes, and clinical behaviors regarding sexual health. In my study, I used the World Health Organization's (2015) definition that states:

> Sexual health is a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. For sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected and fulfilled. (p. 5)

I provided participants with surveys regarding their knowledge, values, clinical behaviors, and training in sexual health. The findings of my study did not surprise me. The majority of clinicians did not have formal training in sexual health and were not comfortable nor believed themselves to be competent in discussing sex with clients. My results did indicate that it was not the amount of knowledge that correlated with whether or not a clinician discussed sex, but rather their attitude and openness. I realized that while a course in human sexuality is helpful, it really is not the knowledge that helps the clinician; rather, it is knowing their own values, beliefs, and being open to different perspectives. This was just as, if not more, important than knowledge alone. Thus, practitioners must not only be knowledgeable about sexual health, but also have a proactive, positive, and respectful approach to addressing sexuality. To be able to better understand their clients' points of view, clinicians must assess their own belief systems and values. Because each person's sexual health is unique, clinicians must be open to asking highly sensitive questions and willing to work with clients who have different beliefs and practices from their own. Sexual health treatment is a complex field of practice that takes time and clinical

skill to develop. In order to do this, students in graduate programs must receive training on sexual topics, as well as how to address them in practice in an ethical and unbiased manner. Knowing that fewer than 15% of clinicians actually addressed sexual health with clients (Russell, 2012) led me to create a graduate Master of Social Work course entitled, Sexual Health in Professional Practice.

I first taught this class in a traditional face-to-face format, in which students engaged in several role plays, video tapings, and analyses of their clinical skills in addition to readings and assignments. As I was teaching the course for the first time, I became aware that I had made an error. I assumed that all the students had prior education in human sexuality and were ready to advance their skills in clinical settings, even though I knew this anecdotally. Three-fourths of the class had no previous training in sexuality. I quickly had to regroup and teach the basics of human sexuality. At the end of the course, 84% of students stated they felt more comfortable with discussing sexual health than before taking the course. I was pleased with this percentage, but I also believed it could be higher. In addition, 75% of students commented on their evaluations that this was the first time anyone had discussed sexual health as a regular part of all stages of the life course, and not only did they increase their knowledge, but their attitudes toward addressing sexual health in a multitude of professional settings were also challenged. Based on student feedback, both in writing via evaluations and in classroom discussions, I changed the course format to include a hybrid component.

In the online hybrid component, students were able to complete modules to increase their knowledge of the basics of sexuality and sexual health and view videos of clinicians performing sexual health interviews that potentially led to the development of more clinical skills. By having students participate in these online activities, it allowed students more time to process the material at their own pace. The online component complemented the face-to-face format well. Of the students who participated in the hybrid format, 89% stated they felt more comfortable in addressing sexual health with clients. To be honest, I was originally resistant to moving this course to a hybrid format. So often sexual health is not discussed openly and I worried that by moving the course online, it would perpetuate this; luckily, the opposite was true. Students liked the hybrid piece and reported that it allowed them "time to think and process" the many different sexual health topics presented in the course. By learning the basics of human sexuality outside of class, it opened the remaining face-to-face classes to explore their own beliefs and values of sexual health and how to increase their comfort levels. I did this by providing specific engagement activities and a framework to increase their comfort level—as well as their confidence over time—with discussing sexual health. Two activities in the class which have had consistently positive responses from students over the ten years of teaching this course are provided in more detail below. The first is the library activity and the second is the application of the Permission, Limited Information, Specific Suggestion, Intensive Therapy (PLISSIT) model (Annon, 1976).

In the second week of class, students are asked to take a trip to their local library and ask the librarian to help them find a book on a sexual health topic of their choice. Common choices for many students include books on how to explain reproduction to children; adolescent sexuality; infertility; and sexual dysfunction. Students are not allowed to buy books online, and they must

have the librarian with whom they work sign off on helping them find a book. In today's day and age, many people are curious about sexual health and are comfortable buying books or other educational materials at home. Asking for help to find such material brings up a lot of mixed reactions for students. Some report that they had no problem asking the librarian for help. Others admit they asked for a book on a less risqué topic or on a socially acceptable topic, such as explaining sexual reproduction to children or health-related books so they wouldn't feel judged or embarrassed. I have had students who have refused to complete the assignment, though this is much less rare. Part of the assignment is that they are not to disclose they are there on an assignment for a graduate class until after they have their chosen book in hand. They bring their books to class and they each provide a reference for other students. The purpose of the activity is two-fold: first, to find a book on a sexual health topic, and second, to discuss their reactions to having to ask for help in finding the book. So often, we as practitioners take for granted how difficult it can be to ask for help and to discuss sexual topics with other people. This activity allows students to challenge their own comfort level as well as become more empathetic to clients. Students report that this is one of their favorite activities of the course because it is experiential and they become aware of their feelings and reactions about going into the public realm searching for sexual health information. They place themselves in "the shoes" of their potential clients and must address their own biases and emotional reactions to others' possible perceptions of what it means to obtain information about sexual health.

In teaching students how to address sexual health in clinical practice, I have found it helpful to provide them with a framework for intervention that helps them address sexual health. The model I use stems from the medical field and is called PLISSIT (Annon, 1976). As noted earlier, PLISSIT is an acronym that stands for Permission (P), Limited Information (LI), Specific Suggestions (SS), and Intensive Treatment (IT). I like this model in part because of the first construct, *permission*. This model teaches students to ask permission of their clients to address sexual health. It also allows the student to give themselves permission to ask about sexual health. Research indicates that addressing sexual health with clients can cause considerable discomfort for the clinician, in part because often they are concerned about making clients uncomfortable, fearful of using the *wrong* language, worried about imparting their own beliefs, or simply not having the correct information to provide to a client (Logie, Bogo, & Katz, 2015; Russell, Gates, & Viggiani, 2016). For all of these reasons and many others, clinicians shy away from addressing sexual health in practice. By reminding themselves (i.e., giving themselves permission) to ask a client's permission to address difficult topics such as sexual health, it can increase their own comfort level and decrease the need to be seen as an expert. Once permission is received from both the client and the clinician, the clinician can then proceed to gathering *limited information* (LI), providing *specific suggestions* (SS)—which may include reading, homework, and finding resources—or providing a referral for *intensive therapy* (IT) with a specialist, often a sex therapist. This model is one that is easy to remember and can be modified to almost any sexual health discussion. It allows for the student to step out of the role of expert and still discuss sexual health in a competent, effective, and comfortable manner. This model provides structure for beginning practitioners and can be applied to almost any population. Overall, students report the ease of remembering the acronym and also like that it takes the pressure off of them by not having to be an expert (the IT portion that includes referrals to other providers when needed).

In addition to including sexual health in professional training, I would be remiss if I did not include the need for future research on sexual health in professional practice. Little is known about what clinicians actually do in their clinical practice regarding sexual health, if they are comfortable addressing the topic, how they approach it, what interventions they use, and the outcomes of such interventions. By destigmatizing sexual health as a regular and normal part of human life, teaching it as a regular part of professional helping curricula can assist in addressing the multitude of sexual health problems clients encounter. Using a culturally humble approach—one in which a helping professional takes a place of curiosity and allows the client to be the expert in their knowledge and treatment of sexual health—is also an area to be further explored through research that can aid in the advancement of sexual health education.

Throughout my years of doing research and teaching, my views on sexual health have not changed dramatically. I still adamantly believe that all individuals in the helping professions need to be trained to discuss sexual health. While I enjoy teaching about sexual health, the number of students taking my Sexual Health in Professional Practice class who have prior sexual health education has not changed, and thus, the need to increase comfort levels of addressing sexual health in an open and empathetic manner have also not changed. Students and practitioners need to be not only educated on the basics of human sexuality but also receive on-going training to understand the influences of culture and social identities on sexual health, how their own values and attitudes toward sexual health can impede or enhance clinical relationships, and the need for skill-based training and evaluation to ensure ethical and effective treatment when sexual health concerns arise. Sexual health is an ever-changing construct that is impacted by a multitude of factors. While I never intended to study or teach sexual health, I believe it is an important part of human function, interactions, and the overall tapestry of life that must be addressed with each client in mental health and other health settings. Knowing how to do this in a respectful, skilled, and nonjudgmental manner takes time, a willingness to learn and make mistakes, and continued practice throughout one's career—mine included. I tell my students that while I teach sexual health and work to "practice what I preach," I am always learning from my interactions with others. I continue to work to be a culturally humble helping professional, teacher, and researcher who continually assesses my own comfort and effectiveness in addressing the ever-changing topic of sexual health.

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